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ABSTRACT

The number of women who elect to study at the community college has escalated dramatically during the last three decades. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that of the 111,607 associate degrees awarded in 1965-1966, 47,828 (43%) were earned by women. In 1993-1994, 542,449 associate degrees were earned, with 321,459 (59%) being awarded to women. The Department of Education also reports that in the fall of 1970, 40% of the 2,195,412 students in public two-year colleges were women. By 1998, 58% of the 5,277,829 community college students were women. Although NCES categories for data collection do not isolate male and female student populations in community colleges by age, it is known that 60% of the public community college students enrolled in the fall of 1995 were 22 or older. Therefore, it is likely that the largest percentage of the community college student population--women--is largely comprised of non-traditionally aged students. This report presents a historic framework in which to examine the influences that have led re-entry women students and community college programs to their current status. This historic framework is followed by a more complete look at the presence of women in community colleges today. Interview protocol appended. (Contains 111 references.) (NB)

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ED 462 114

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

# DETERMINED TO SUCCEED:

# RE-ENTRY WOMEN IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN

LEADERSHIP, FOUNDATIONS, AND COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

BY

JEAN VAN LANDUYT KARTJE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2000

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## ABSTRACT

A phenomenological study of the experiences of eighteen re-entry women graduates from three distinctive community colleges offers rich description of their motivations and backgrounds and the institutional factors that contributed to their success. Descriptions of the graduates' commitment to learning; the role of the faculty; teaching/learning interactions both in and out of the classroom; and the importance of formal and informal feedback help explicate the individual and societal value of investing in the success of this growing student sector. Implications for higher education and recommendations for further research are explored.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This study is about the mistresses of American higher education--adult women students in community colleges. They are people who make non-traditional choices at non-traditional ages at non-traditional institutions. These so-called "OTAs" (older than average students) (Gilpin, 1990) attend the schools which have been labeled the "Ellis Islands of higher education" (Vaughan, 1983, p. 9), "Democracy's Colleges" (Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppinger, 1994), and "Anti-University Colleges"(Jencks & Riesman, 1968). Although largely invisible in academe, these women exert considerable influence in their homes, schools, and communities.

The number of women who elect to study in the community college has escalated dramatically during the last three decades. The U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that of the 111,607 associate degrees awarded in 1965-1966, 47,828--or 43%--were earned by women; the 1993-1994 data indicate that 542,449 associate degrees were earned, with 321,459--or 59%--being awarded to community college women (1996). It is no wonder that more women are earning associate degrees than men in the 1990s, given dramatic shifts in the enrollment in community colleges over time. The Department of Education reports that in the fall of 1970, women comprised only 40% of the 2,195,412 students in public two-year colleges; by 1995, 58% of the 5,277,829

students enrolled in public community colleges were women, representing a 255% change over time (1997). Unfortunately, NCES categories for data collection do not isolate the male and female student populations in community colleges by age; however, it is known that over 60% of the public community college students enrolled in the fall of 1995 were 22 years of age or older (NCES, 1997). Therefore, it is likely that the largest percent of the community college student population (women) is largely comprised of non-traditionally aged students (22 years of age or older).

Despite the growth of college re-entry women students, few scholars have studied this student sector to determine how their educational experiences have affected them in their personal and professional lives. The studies that do exist concentrate primarily on white, middle class women enrolled in four-year college or university programs. These studies are dated and focus on quantifying data regarding barriers, needed services, and motivations for returning to school. This study provided a new look at re-entry women students by utilizing qualitative research methods to examine women who elected to study in public community colleges; women of various socio-cultural and economic groups; and women who articulated and explored the value of their college experience from the graduate's perspective.

In order to determine where community college women are today, it is valuable to examine the parallel influences which have led re-entry women students and community college programs to their current status. Thus, a historical framework is established, followed by a more complete look at the presence of women in community colleges today. This information reinforces the importance of understanding the experiences of members of this unique student sector in order that women might be increasingly successful in securing

their place in the academy.

## Historical Perspectives

The higher education of women and the development of community college systems have not followed straight trajectories. Rather, social and political forces have combined with cultural values and economic pressures to weave the paths which propelled both women students and community colleges to their present positions in the American higher education arena. Three circumstances can be seen as boons to the education of women and to the development of two year institutions: 1) the elitist, white male-dominated legacy of European thought, 2) the democratic ideal which changed the social and political positions of various cultural groups, and 3) government support for public higher education. Although these are three distinct categories, their respective goals and impacts are interwoven to define the fabric of community college education for women today.

During colonial times, American colleges were developed to educate male religious and civic leaders according to the aristocratic traditions of Europe. Therefore, they were institutions reserved for men of status who were trained in the classical curriculum. There was no place for women in this environment. In fact, noted historian Frederick Rudolph (1962) observed that "the colonial view of woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior--incapable, merely by reason of being a woman, of great thoughts. Her faculties were not worth training. Her place was in the home, where man had assigned her a number of useful functions" (pp. 307-308). However, as the American frontier offered greater challenges and opportunities for all, sheer necessity dictated that women's roles also would change. Frontier women needed to know how to manage accounts, assist with physical

labor, and educate their sons to participate as responsible citizens in a democratic society (Rudolph, 1962). Although American women assumed broader roles than the decorative and servile stance of their European counterparts, the development of educational equity lagged. According to Rudolph (1962):

> In a world where everything and everyone was progressing, where the sacredness of the human personality and inherent rights of the individual in society were advanced as fundamental truths, in such a world higher education for women received the attention of mankind along with such causes as prison reform, education for the blind, the care of the insane, the rights of children, and the emancipation of slaves. (p. 311)

It is important to note that, despite competing social concerns, by the mid-nineteenth century women were finding a place in higher education, primarily through female seminaries--an extension of the high school tradition--or "co-ordinate colleges" which were separate educational entities for women aligned with established colleges for men (Solomon, 1985). The accomplishments of women students in co-ordinate colleges--which included institutions such as Radcliffe, Barnard and Pembroke--were recognized by the awarding of certificates from male institutions after appropriate examinations were passed. In addition, institutions designed for women's education found support in the late 1800s, when schools like Vassar, Smith and Wellesley opened their doors (Rudolph, 1962). Finally, in 1883, Oberlin College in Ohio became the first coeducational institution in America (Tittle & Denker, 1980).

This eventual acceptance of women into formerly male institutions can be attributed,

in part, to survival as much as any democratic ideal. To cut to the bottom line, women students meant larger enrollments and larger enrollments meant economic viability. Rudolph states that "for all coeducational colleges, the increase in men students from 1875 to 1900 was threefold and of women students sixfold. At Northwestern the enrollment of women students so threatened the coeducational nature of the institution that an engineering course was added to bolster the dwindling male forces" (p. 323).

During this period when women students were influencing American higher education in impressive and dramatic ways, increased federal legislation and the movement to uncouple the first two years of college from the university curriculum also were actively changing the texture of American higher education.

The Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant Act, is often identified as the significant event which expanded access to public higher education in the United States by emphasizing "vocational" courses of study and embracing students who had previously been excluded from higher education (Veysey, 1965). In 1890, the second Morrill Act further expanded this legislation to ensure that minorities had access to public higher education (Rudolph, 1962). These two legislative acts caused a broadening of the conceptualization of American higher education from a classical curriculum taught to male members of the elite society to a system which recognized the value of diverse educational experiences for a diverse student body. The system not only recognized the value of an educated citizenry, but provided government support toward this end.

The Morrill Acts furthered the formation of public land-grant universities, which were responsible for another trend which shaped the course of modern higher education in

America. In 1904 the University of Wisconsin developed the "Wisconsin Idea," a philosophy which created extension services and targeted educational assistance to the unique needs of state government and local citizenry. With this plan, the University moved its curriculum into the community, addressing educational needs and issues which extended well beyond those previously covered in a classical education. The state became the university campus.

Once the system opened its doors wide, higher education sought ways to stratify the experiences. In 1901, Joliet Junior College was founded under the influence of William Rainey Harper, President of the University of Chicago. This institution is considered the oldest junior college in the nation and set the stage for other institutions that would provide the first two years of college education after high school, as well as the training for particular career areas.

The two-year college concept emanated from the philosophies of eminent educational leaders of the mid-1800s. Presidents Henry A. Tappan of the University of Michigan and William Watts Folwell of the University of Minnesota influenced William Rainey Harper in his plan to separate the first two years of study at the new University of Chicago from the last two years of study. Called "junior college" and "senior college," these distinct programs permitted the university to focus on its important research and upper division education, free from the tedium of teaching foundational general education requirements (Cohen & Brawer, 1987; Rudolph, 1962; Thornton, 1966). Modeled after the European universities and secondary schools, it was thought that this divided system would strengthen weaker colleges as they adopted junior college roles and would permit youths to extend their stay in the

family home until they reached a level of maturity that would permit them to succeed at the university (Cohen & Brawer, 1987).

The junior college concept blossomed at the turn of the twentieth century. Dramatic progress in scientific theories and industrial technologies increased the need for trained workers in an environment where the democratic ideal promised that hard work would result in advancement. Schools began to play a dominant role in educating and forming America's youth to accept the standards and obligations of the industrial society. "In the colleges, the question 'What knowledge is of most worth?' was rarely asked; the belief in learning for its own sake was in retreat. The more likely question was 'What knowledge yields the greatest tangible benefit to individuals or to society?' The public perceived schooling as an avenue of upward mobility and as a contributor to the community's wealth" (Cohen & Brawer, 1987, p. 2). Junior colleges grew rapidly to accept the challenges. In 1909, twenty junior colleges were reported in existence; ten years later, 170 colleges were identified; by 1922, 207 colleges were operating in thirty-seven of the forty-eight United States (Koos, 1924). Many of these colleges were concentrated in the West and Midwest, where the unsettled nature of the land gave rise to women's suffrage and challenges to the democratic principles inherent in the electoral college (Cohen & Brawer, 1987).

The developing community colleges were modeled after the land-grant colleges formed by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (Shearon & Tollefson, 1989). Like their forebears, community colleges were designed to serve a diverse student body, offering a curriculum which extended beyond the traditional liberal arts and sciences programs to include the more utilitarian vocational arts training. Also like their forebears, the service

district of community colleges were broadly determined in order to serve the various constituencies and educational needs of a specific region.

Two other federal activities expanded the role of women and community colleges in America. The first, the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill, provided financial assistance for veterans of World War II who wished to pursue higher education. "The GI Bill was a milestone in the federal funding of education . . . and did much to break down the economic and social barriers to allow millions of Americans to attend college. Indeed, over 2.2 million veterans, including over 60,000 women and approximately 70,000 African Americans, attended college under the GI Bill" (Vaughan, 1995, p.41).

These veterans were to dramatically change the nature of the higher education classroom, bringing with them the life and death experience of war and the maturity of their years. The war veterans surprised even the most elite institutions by their intelligence, knowledge, and analytic abilities. The standards set by this non-traditional student body opened the higher education door wider for women, minorities, and students of all ages.

A second action, President Truman's appointment of the President's Commission on Higher Education in 1946, would also have far reaching influences, particularly upon the nature of two-year institutions. This Commission made recommendations to ensure that every American had access to education "suited to his aptitude and interests" (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, p. 36). In this vein, states were urged to develop new institutions, create oversight boards, and strengthen the community college concept; the federal government was urged to establish scholarship programs, provide aid for public

institutions, and pass legislation banning discrimination in admissions practices (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Ravitch, 1983; Witt et al., 1994). Ravitch notes that the Commission's recommendations "gave great impetus to the burgeoning community college movement, and especially, to the drive to convert junior colleges, which had been regarded as either adjuncts to universities or extensions to high schools, to community colleges designed to meet the educational needs of the local community, with comprehensive offerings and little or no tuition" (1983, p. 18).

While this brief summary does not begin to distinguish the many individuals, groups, and activities which resulted in the community college system and its diverse student body, it provides a glimpse of the various activities that held women separate from higher education and developed the community college as a democratic institution which would welcome and enhance the numbers of women embraced by higher education.

It also provides insight into the ambivalent description of community colleges and their students provided by Frederick Rudolph in his text, *Curriculum:*

> Perhaps more than any other element in the structure of formal education it [the community college] has operated, in Clifton Faiman's terms, as a "detention center." But it has been more than that. It has both generalized opportunity and cushioned failure. It has held out the promise of economic and social mobility and also verified low intellectual, social, and economic status. . . it has been an instrument of individual liberation and of social control. It has been the lowest point of access to universal education beyond the high school and it has been an invitation to the American Dream. It is

Abraham Lincoln's snow-drifted cabin. It will produce a president of the United States. (1977, p. 286)

## Current Perspectives

14,278,790 students enrolled in American institutions of higher education in 1994; 5,529,710 of these students attended one of the more than 1200 community colleges (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). From their humble beginnings, community colleges have evolved to modern institutions which share certain values and missions. First, community colleges support the democratic principle which requires an educated citizenry. These colleges serve specific geographic regions, offering comprehensive educational programs which complement the high schools from which students emerge as well as the colleges and universities, technological and professional programs, or career opportunities toward which they gravitate.

Community colleges operate under an "open door" philosophy that encourages all students who can benefit to enter. This does not mean that every student can immediately enroll in physics or advanced marketing, rather, each student may enter and, with guidance, enroll in courses that are best suited to his or her abilities and aspirations. The community colleges' low tuition, regional service, and open admissions policies tend to attract a diverse student group. These students enter the two-year college in order to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate program, prepare for a career in a technical or scientific field, engage in non-credit adult education classes to upgrade skills or explore an area of interest, or to prepare for college success by completing the General Education Development (GED) or

basic skills/English as a Second Language course work (Thornton, 1966).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) involves 1,046 institutional member colleges. The Association's *1995 Research Brief on Membership* indicates that

> community colleges. . . serve students of all age groups, ethnicity, and background, especially those who may not otherwise have the opportunity for a higher education. Despite their diversity, community college students are unique in representing a higher percentage of women and older population compared with the four-year institutions. (Li, 1995)

The March 4, 1998 *National Community College Snapshot* indicates that 10.5 million students are enrolled in the 980 public and 141 independent community colleges in America, with slightly more students enrolled in credit bearing courses than non-credit programs. Community college students represent 45 percent of all undergraduate students in the United States. These students represent 42 percent of all African American students in higher education, 55 percent of all Hispanic students, 40 percent of all Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 50 percent of all Native American students in higher education. Fifty-eight percent of these students are female, forty-seven percent are first-time freshmen, and the average age of the students is 29 years (AACC, 1997).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report titled *Profile of Older Undergraduates: 1989-90*, indicates that 56.2 percent of the student population in 2-year public institutions are 25 years or older, with students 25 to 40 composing 40.5 percent of the group. "Compared with their younger counterparts in community colleges, older students

(those 25 and up) tend to be quite different in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, enrollment patterns, employment experience while studying, use of financial aid to pay for their education, and persistence" (AACC, 1995). The NCES report indicates that older students are predominately white and female. Often married with dependents or single parents, these students have moderate to low family incomes; frequently study part-time while employed; and tend to take longer to complete an associate's degree or certificate than their younger counterparts (NCES, 1995).

The statistics describing community college students point to increased participation in higher education by women. A survey completed by NCES and AACC in the fall of 1994 examined headcount enrollments in public community colleges by attendance status and sex from 1985-1994.

Table 1

Fall Headcount Enrollment in Public Community Colleges by Attendance Status and Sex: 1985-1994

| | Full-Time | Part-Time | % Full-Time | Male | Female | % Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1985 | 1,496,905 | 2,772,828 | 35.1% | 1,880,684 | 2,389,049 | 56.0% | 4,269,733 |
| 1986 | 1,505,873 | 2,907,818 | 34.1% | 1,934,938 | 2,478,753 | 56.2% | 4,413,691 |
| 1987 | 1,530,912 | 3,010,142 | 33.7% | 1,968,840 | 2,572,214 | 56.6% | 4,541,054 |
| 1988 | 1,567,973 | 3,047,514 | 34.0% | 1,976,800 | 2,638,687 | 57.2% | 4,615,487 |
| 1989 | 1,674,249 | 3,209,411 | 34.3% | 2,095,325 | 2,788,335 | 57.1% | 4,883,660 |
| 1990 | 1,716,843 | 3,279,632 | 34.4% | 2,128,394 | 2,868,081 | 57.4% | 4,995,475 |
| 1991 | 1,885,607 | 3,519,208 | 34.9% | 2,295,449 | 3,109,369 | 57.5% | 5,404,815 |
| 1992 | 1,917,716 | 3,567,796 | 35.0% | 2,309,687 | 3,175,825 | 57.9% | 5,485,512 |
| 1993 | 1,918,192 | 3,419,136 | 35.9% | 2,256,940 | 3,080,388 | 57.7% | 5,337,328 |
| 1994(1) | 1,963,173 | 3,433,463 | 36.4% | 2,247,421 | 3,149,215 | 58.4% | 5,396,636 |

Sources: NCES, AACC 1994 Fall Survey (Reprinted with permission.)

(1) Estimated from AACC 1994 Fall Survey

As indicated in Table 1, the majority of students in community college classrooms are

women, and the majority of the students carry part-time course loads. One third of these students study in the five states of California, Texas, Illinois, North Carolina, and New York (AACC, 1997).

These statistics--startling in both volume and longevity--tell us a great deal about changes in higher education classrooms and hallways. However, they are merely numbers, and must be brought to life by the implicit and explicit qualities of the lives they represent. Interestingly, these numbers parallel statistics for the state of Illinois, where the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) reported that 675,554 students were enrolled in 49 public community colleges in 1996. Of this number, 56% were female and the median age of the students was 26.6 years with a mean age of 30.4 years (ICCB, 1997).

The statistical profile of community college students in the United States and the state of Illinois implies that the most typical student on two-year campuses is female, aged 25 or older, probably with dependents, and probably employed while commuting to classes part-time. This person does not fit the traditional perspective of the modern college student. Sororities and fraternities, big time college sports, residence hall living and the traditional "coming of age" experiences that are associated with the typical undergraduate are not likely to be a part of the college life of a student most commonly referred to as a "re-entry woman."

This study sought to examine the unique experiences of these women as they studied

in the "people's colleges"--American community colleges.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the experiences of re-entry women in the community college sector. More specifically, the study involved interviews with eighteen female graduates of three community colleges in Illinois in order to develop a textured understanding of not only the challenges they faced as community college students, but also the personal and professional value that they derived from their educational experiences. The following research questions were explored:

1. How do re-entry women in the community college setting describe, interpret and evaluate their experiences from a graduate perspective?
2. To what extent do female graduates who entered a community college as re-entry students articulate similar or dissimilar experiences? How can the differences be explicated?
3. What--if any--characteristics of community college programs or environments do female graduates who entered as re-entry students believe contributed to the value of their college experiences?

## Definition of Terms

To clarify the terminology utilized in this study, the following discussions are provided to ensure a common definition of terms.

**Re-entry Women**. A number of terms are used to refer to those students who enter higher education programs after the traditional age of 18-22 years. Non-traditional student, OTA (Older-than-Average), rusty ladies, returning or re-entry students, mature students,

over-thirty undergrads, adult students, continuing education students, and "DARs" ("Damned [grade point] Average Raisers") are just a few of the terms in the literature or in actual use on college campuses.

Unfortunately, many of these same descriptors have been applied to different populations indiscriminately. "Non-traditional student" is a term which is applied at different times to students who are older, minority, handicapped, part-time, low-income, or women. Generally, this term means those who were traditionally excluded from or under-represented in higher education classrooms. "Continuing education" connotes lifelong learning and non-credit course work for personal or professional advancement. Thus, this term is double-edged when applied to the student who wishes to develop or change c[illegible] order to support a family or increase a salary. Terms like "older," "mature," "adult," "OTA" and "DAR" are most often truthful statements about the students in their studies; however, they are, in their own ways, laden with derogatory messages to both the student earning the label and those students who are not branded by the words, who are, in contrast, younger, immature children. Since the terms "re-entry" or "returning" student are more descriptive and less negative than others in common use at this time, in this study the term "re-entry" students was used to define those students who are over twenty-five (25) years of age; engaged in formal higher education; and have work, family, or community responsibilities. It is important to note that this definition included those students who returned to an undergraduate community college program after a prior post-secondary experience, as well as those students who entered the post-secondary education sector for the first time after the age of twenty-five.

Significant numbers of re-entry students are women who have entered the college setting after a lengthy interruption of their education. They include: childless career women who are single or married and return to school to enhance current skills; career women with families who return to train for a particular work-related goal; women with families who discontinued their education while focusing on homemaking and child rearing; and women who have experienced a key event such as divorce, death of a partner, work-related changes, or health concerns (Johnson, Wallace & Selacek, 1983; Kahnweiler & Johnson, 1980).

This study focused on women graduates of three community colleges who were no less than 25 years of age upon admission to the colleges and who represented the range of re-entry women previously described.

**Graduate.** In this study, a graduate was defined as an individual who earned an Associate in Arts degree, an Associate in Science degree, an Associate in Applied Science Degree, or an Associate in Engineering degree from a public two-year college as classified by The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1974).

**Public Community College**. For the purposes of this study, a public community college was defined as a two-year college that offers a comprehensive educational program, including the first two years of a baccalaureate program; vocational and technical study which may lead to terminal credentials for that field; adult basic education, English as a Second Language (ESL) course work and General Education Development (GED) preparation; non-credit continuing education; and customized training and educational programs for local business and industry. The community college served a specific geographic region as defined by statute and was supported in good measure by local or state

funds.

**Value**. The value of an idea, activity, item or venture is frequently weighted by economic terms. What is the return on the investment? What is the "cost" in resources such as dollars, energy, time? What is "lost" because an individual elected item A or plan B versus another option? What is gained?

The value of a community college experience can surely be measured in dollars. Studies show that community college graduates annually will earn approximately $7,300 more than colleagues holding high school diplomas or GED certificates (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). This notwithstanding, the purpose of this study was to move beyond statistics and generalizations to examine particular cases. Therefore, value was defined as the significance, importance, and meaning which the re-entry woman student attached to her educational experience at a community college, whether such value had economic, emotional, social, personal or spiritual outcomes.

## Significance of the Study

Women students and community colleges have become the backbone of higher education today. As women's roles in American society continue to change, as information and service industries replace technological and labor arenas, and as educational benefits continue to define the "haves" and the "have nots," it is essential that women and educators understand the nature of the educational experience for this important group.

This study has potential significance in three areas. First, it helps to articulate and enrich current understandings of the experiences of re-entry women students in community colleges. While there has been a good deal of research into the motivations, the barriers, and

needs of re-entry women, there has been little written about what sustains them in their educational ventures. Exploring these issues draws on the notions of feminist research, which posits that women have unique experiences which cannot be defined by the male dominated histories and analyses of modern America. The literature in this area has been modest at best, particularly in light of the constantly increasing portion of undergraduates that this student group represents.

Second, this study examined the re-entry woman student's experiences from a new perspective--the graduate's point of view. With few exceptions (LaPaglia, 1993; Robertson, 1991), the re-entry woman's story has been explored and portrayed through quantitative measures of the students' perceptions while enrolled in a course of study. Accordingly, the stress, barriers, advantages, and other "costs" of the experience have been interwoven with competing interests and issues, often reducing the results down to little more than tests of statistical significance. This does not mean that the graduate of a community college abandons the joys or responsibilities of family, work, or society while confidently operating in a stress- free environment. Rather, the graduate perspective provides some distance on the experience, some opportunity to examine the situation from a full and, hopefully, balanced perspective. In addition, this study identified those valuable aspects of the experience which could be enhanced to help others persist to graduation. In that regard, graduation is seen as a measure of success for these students (Robertson, 1991).

Third, since re-entry women and community colleges are challenging the roles and historical values of higher education, this study provides an opportunity for faculty, administrators, and others to learn about and better understand these students and

institutions, thus ensuring greater readiness for future educational trends. Its findings offer an important means by which higher education leaders can garner fuller and richer perspectives, which, in turn, may lead to the development of effective practices and policies focused on re-entry women.

## CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although American higher education can be traced back to the colonial period, and the presence of women can be tracked even further, the feminine influence on higher education took on new significance in the 1960s. Certainly, women were present in colleges and universities before this point, but their numbers were relatively small and female students were concentrated in particular programs, institutions, or regions. Most likely, many believed the joke that women in higher education were more interested in attaching the letters "Mrs." to their names than any which a college or university might award.

Shifts in thought about the role of education and actual shifts in societal expectations and attitudes have led to dramatic changes in the twentieth century. Community colleges and government support made higher education accessible to larger, more diverse student pools. Changes in the nature of work--from an industrial to a service to an information to a technological base--have blurred the definitions of "men's work" and "women's work." Occupations which were previously considered "vocational" now require highly skilled employees who are able to work with complicated technological systems, perplexing workplace dynamics, international colleagues, and rapidly changing assumptions. Single heads of household, increased job and household mobility, multiple real-time communication avenues, and unprecedented career changes are challenging the twenty-year retirement watch

and white picket fence American dream promoted by 1950's television shows.

It is not surprising that this environment produced a pathway for adult American women to enter higher education in droves. The relatively new phenomenon of re-entry woman students led to quandaries, speculation and research as educators worked to develop descriptions and understandings of this unique student sector.

Studies of re-entry women have utilized surveys, interviews, complex statistical analysis, quantitative efforts to test various hypothetical conditions and qualitative methods to develop theory. In a matter of decades, these efforts have been essential in establishing a body of knowledge and refining the ways in which re-entry women students are understood and served. Various perspectives are helpful to organize the literature which articulates the re-entry woman in modern American higher education. These include perspectives that describe the female re-entry student and the challenges she typically faces; perspectives that explore the life cycles and transitions which motivate the adult learner; and perspectives that use the voice of the re-entry student to develop understanding and formulate responses.

## Portraits of the Re-entry Woman Student: Who is She?

Over time research questions to describe re-entry women have been fairly consistent. Studies have asked: Who are these women? What kinds of problems are they confronting, and how can educational institutions help resolve the problems they confront? (Astin, 1976; Brandenburg, 1974; Smallwood, 1980; Tittle & Denker, 1980). Although exceptions to every rule are noted, the early literature presents a fairly homogeneous picture of the re-entry woman student. "She is generally in her thirties or forties, married, and a housewife with children. She is usually white and from the middle class, with some college experience

before marriage. She has a history of paid work and/or volunteer experience, and she is financially stable" (Holliday, 1985, p. 62).

She may be a woman in "middle motherhood," seeking her own identity when her children and spouse become invested in school and career and need her less. Battling depression, isolation and fear of failure, she turns to school to rebuild her self worth (Brandenburg, 1974; Grottkau & Davis, 1987). She may be a woman who is "freed" to explore new opportunities resulting from the increased life span of modern women, the late twentieth century tendency of women to marry later and have smaller families, or the "reduction in the time demand of housework made possible by technological advances" which are cited by Kathie Smallwood (1980, p. 65). Ultimately, she has been cast as a woman using education to redefine her role in light of a maturing family structure, facing the stress of changed relationships with family and friends, and enduring resistance from others which ranges from passive indifference to open hostility (Brandenburg, 1974).

In 1980, K. Patricia Cross discussed the "new clientele changing the face of higher education," namely, the re-entry student, whom she labels an adult learner. These individuals are academically successful, goal driven and independent, with "primary educational needs for schedules, curricula, and instruction appropriate to their maturity and adult responsibilities" (p. 617). Cross notes that the participation of adult learners in higher education is influenced by three factors: past levels of educational attainment, the labor market, and the changing role of women. After citing statistics which confirm the rapid pace at which re-entry women entered colleges and universities in the 1960s and 1970s, Cross notes:

> Right now it is hard to imagine factors that would decrease the demand for education among women, unless women become disenchanted with new career opportunities or "the family" does an about-face and moves in directions quite contrary to today's trends. (pp. 628-629)

The literature offers a number of other reasons why a woman might re-enter higher education, including economic necessity; preparation for a first career or occupation or change in career or occupation (Johnson, Wallace & Sedlacek, 1983); need for intellectual fulfillment and challenge; pursuit of personal interests; skill development or enrollment for an advanced degree to increase employment options; "trigger incidents," such as divorce or the death of a spouse (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Kahnweiler & Johnson, 1980); to satisfy an increased desire for education (Astin, 1976); or to enhance her personal and professional status as a college graduate (Holliday, 1985; Tittle & Denker, 1980).

The complexity of the issues facing re-entry women are underscored by three barriers that they typically encounter as college students (Cross, 1981; Ekstrom, 1972; Tittle & Denker, 1980). These include "institutional barriers," such as outdated entrance requirements or rigid class schedules, insufficient financial assistance and child care, and faculty and student bias against re-entry students and/or part-time students (Plotsky, 1975). "Dispositional barriers" also cause tension and conflict for re-entry women. These barriers include guilt, isolation, pressure of multiple roles and expectations, lack of confidence, and low self-esteem or depression (Astin, 1976; Hooper, 1979; Scott & King, 1985). Researchers have likewise identified various "situational barriers" common to re-entry women, including stereotypical

gender expectations which are culture-laden, or which may no longer be functional. In 1978, Westervelt noted:

> Today's woman has been socialized to live in a world that no longer exists, to give primacy to roles that become psychologically and socially constricting and whose duration is highly uncertain, to acquire behavior styles that ill fit the responsibilities she is likely to have to carry. ( p.28, in Grottkau & Davis, 1987)

In 1987, Grottkau and Davis proposed parallel perspectives on issues which thwart a woman's return to higher education, categorizing them as practical, psychological and sociological barriers.

Efforts to understand the challenges re-entry women encounter in their relationships with others have yielded mixed results. For instance, a study conducted by Scott and King (1985) asked husbands of re-entry college women to review and comment on case studies of various family environments. Statistical analyses revealed that

> family role behavior had a significant main effect on spousal support: subjects gave stronger support to the woman who continued to meet all or part of her family's needs than to the woman who neglected her family. Further, the overcompensating wife was perceived as more likely to earn an advanced degree as compared to her counterparts, suggesting the existence of a "Super-Mom" stereotype. . . .participants perceived that the husband of the noncompensating
>
> woman was experiencing more stress [and] the noncompensating woman

> also was perceived as experiencing more stress than her counterparts, perhaps because participants believed she should feel guilty about neglecting her family. The results suggest that a returning woman must "earn" support for her education by continuing to meet her family's and husband's needs. (pp. 11-13)

Succinctly stated: change creates stress.

The study conducted by Scott and King directly contradicts earlier findings by Katz (1976) in which questionnaire and interview data were collected from a large group of married students and their spouses or children. His research indicated strong emotional and financial support for the re-entry women, improved marital relations, positive effects on the children and increased self- awareness and personal happiness for the women.

In addition to these role/relationship conflict studies, other scholars have examined time-to-degree among re-entry women students. In 1991, for example, Robertson found that, overall, re-entry women tend to progress less rapidly toward graduation than their male counterparts, "stopping out" for periods of time and thereby extending their college experience. When she examined her findings more closely, however, Robertson discovered that, when the pattern of interruptions for men and women were similar, there was no significant difference in progress toward completion of the degrees. Although Robertson does not attempt to explain this finding, she does propose various feminist theories to "suggest that this pattern results from the greater relationship responsiveness of women compared with men and the more diverse role demands experienced by women relative to men" (p. 494).

Aware of the challenges and barriers that re-entry women students face, institutions have attempted to address the issues in various ways. The typical early response to re-entry student concerns involved helping them assimilate into systems and services designed for traditional students. In many ways, these early undertakings focused on the needs of higher education to recruit and retain this new student pool rather than the needs of the students. Efforts to discern the personal aspects of a re-entry student's life were primarily designed to identify and ease issues which would impinge upon students' abilities to be successful and persist to graduation (Edwards, 1993). The resultant changes were most often reflected in modifications to academic programs and services to increase the attractiveness of the endeavor through alternative scheduling, extension and continuing education services, internships or cooperative education credit (Thon, 1984). Student service resolutions included personal counseling (to explore the extent to which women prevent their own success), orientation programs and basic skills programs, smooth admissions programs, the availability of financial aid and child care, and adequate academic and career advisement (Brandenburg, 1974; Ekstrom, 1972; Wheaton & Robinson, 1993).

Interestingly, while the literature on re-entry women students tends to make comparisons between traditionally-aged students and re-entry students, or between re-entry men and re-entry women, the literature does not attempt to distinguish between women with diverse economic backgrounds, women who sought careers rather than homemaking as their primary role, or women who represented minority perspectives (Astin, 1976; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Fortunately, a more holistic look at these students developed over time in various studies focused on adult development and learning. Examination of this literature further illuminates this study.

## Life Cycle Research

Several studies apply theories on adult development during the mid-life years to re-entry students in order to understand their motivations, expectations, experiences and goals. Among others, these include the work of Astin (1976), Brandenburg (1974) and Kahnweiler and Johnson (1980).

The first life cycle studies were based upon male models which identified a pattern of behavior and orderly transitions to new stages and development (Gould, 1972; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978; Lowenthal, Chiriboga, Thurnher & Associates, 1975). Levinson et al. (1978) identified four major life stages, calling them Childhood and Adolescence, Early Adulthood, Middle Adulthood and Late Adulthood, and arguing that different stresses accompany each phase. Lowenthal and Associates (1975) took a slightly different approach, asserting that all stages of life are stressful, requiring self-examination, reassessment of goals and plans, and adjustments to effect change. Roger Gould (1972) identified various stages -- or life phases -- in which important shifts depended upon the individual's sense of time and attitudes toward self and others.

Kahnweiler and Johnson (1980) integrated the thinking of Gould (1972), Levinson et al. (1978), Lowenthal et al. (1975) and others to identify seven "developmental concerns" of Middle Adulthood transitions which might be applicable to women. These concerns included:

1. Introspective concerns regarding mental or emotional processes;

2. Concerns related to physical changes and the aging process, including positive or negative experiences of menopause and perceived changes in attractiveness;

3. Concerns related to the awareness of mortality and limited time in which to achieve life goals;

4. Concerns related to perceptions that an individual's experience is unique and unusual, and the individual, therefore, is isolated from others and lacks support;

5. Concerns related to the changing role as parent, which may be experienced as a loss or a means of freedom;

6. Concerns related to the role as spouse when life changes create friction or increased

independence or need for support;

7. Concerns related to the changed role as a child who may become caretaker for aging parents.

In addition to these targeted concerns, adult development studies have embraced the specific "culminating event" that is described by Levinson and his associates (1978) as a fulfilled "Dream"--with a capital D--that has a particular meaning to an individual in terms of his or her life's worth and achievement.

Over time, scholars began to recognize that the male experience and response did not adequately represent the feelings, attitudes, and issues which characterize the female perspective at a given point, and theories about adult female development began to emerge. A model dependent upon the woman's role as spouse and mother was proposed by H. A. Lopata in 1966. Lopata viewed the cycle like the frame of a mountain. The foot of the mountain represents marriage and the birth of the first child. The view expands as additional children are born, with the apex of the mountain being reached when two or more preschool

children consume the mother's attention. From the point at which the youngest child enters school until the oldest child leaves home, life is described as a "full house plateau." After this point, the perspective begins to shrink, until the base of the mountain becomes a final plateau experience after all of the children have left the home. To Lopata's thinking, children broaden the horizon and bring stability to the terrain. Thus, a woman's life cycle is dependent upon others who define her significance.

In 1982, Carol Gilligan published her study of college students as they explored identity and moral development in their early adult years; women engaged in conflicts related to the decisions surrounding a possible abortion; and men and women's perspectives on rights and responsibilities. Gilligan (1982) contends that "attachment and separation anchor the cycle of human life" (p. 151) in both biological and psychological realms. However, since human development has been defined by male experiences, the processes of individuation, separation, and personal/professional achievement have dominated. Gilligan's study concludes:

> As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection. The failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and

> interpretation. By positing instead two different modes, we arrive at a more complex rendition of human experience which sees the truth of separation and attachment in the lives of women and men and recognizes how these truths are carried by different modes of language and thought. (1982, pp. 173-174)

Gilligan's work inspired a collaborative study published in 1986 by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule which further explored the unique development of women in a book titled *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Belenky et al. interviewed 135 women affiliated with one of nine different academic or social service settings. Their study focused on the women's experiences of themselves as individuals, their relationships with significant others, their decision-making and values clarification processes, their formal and informal educational experiences, their experiences which served as catalysts for growth and change and their future hopes. Intensive review of the transcripts resulting from the interviews led Belenky and her colleagues to elaborate upon Gilligan's metaphor of "voice" as a feminine modality. They note:

> We had not anticipated that 'voice' was more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view. Well after we were into our interviews with women, we became aware that it is a metaphor . . . [with] an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection with others. We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development, and that the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self

were intricately intertwined. (p.18)

The research of Belenky et al. (1986) identified five epistemological perspectives on women's knowing which are thoroughly reviewed in their book. Briefly, these categories include *silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.* The silenced woman experiences herself as powerless in an environment in which an external authority rules. This individual perceives herself as having no voice and is distanced from the activities and decisions which frame her world. The silenced woman was the smallest category in the study and its members were often "socially, economically, and educationally deprived" (1986, pp. 33-34).

The received knowledge position reflects women in a connected relationship with the world. The received knower learns from authorities by listening and ingesting their thoughts and ideas. The received knower is a novice at the expert's feet, learning and often regurgitating ideas, but not able to enhance that knowledge to create new or unique insights.

According to Belenky et al., the subjective knower voices an intuitive and personal understanding of facts and truth. This is an important point for the women in the study. "As a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the 'still small voice' within her, she finds an inner source of strength" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 54). In the process of recognizing and heeding her own cognitions, the subjective knower becomes a person of power and voice; however, the voice is limited to the experiences of the subjective knower and is a reflection of the individual's intuitive response to information or activities rather than a reasoned search for truth. The women in the subjective knowledge category of knowers were "not usually students in

prestigious colleges but were in more experimental or community educational settings. Many had been school drop outs as younger women who only recently returned as adults to complete degrees or acquire new skills" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 56). The subjectivist knower often seeks new experiences in an effort to more fully define her voice. In the study by Belenky et al., the subjectivist women often rejected those relationships or situations which

were viewed as confining, at times resulting in divorces, the adoption of new careers or adventures, or pursuit of other dramatic life changes in the effort to understand their stance in the world.

The procedural knower uses an analytical perspective to interpret her world. Knowledge is garnered through a filter which utilizes reason and objectivity as its medium. Two forms of procedural knowing were identified by Belenky and her colleagues: separate knowing and connected knowing. On the one hand, separate procedural knowers utilize standard analytic lenses to process information; they rely upon objectivity and critical thinking to understand their world. On the other hand, connected procedural knowers learn by placing themselves in an empathic position, using a nonjudgmental approach to understanding a person, a piece of art, or a literary work. "Procedural knowledge is 'objective' in the sense of being oriented away from the self--the knower--and toward the object the knower seeks to analyze or understand" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 123). In the case of separate knowers, the objectivity is developed through the tools of a particular discipline or subject; in the case of connected knowers, the objectivity results from attempts to understand the situation through the perspectives of the other.

The final feminine voice, that of the constructivist knower, integrates intuition, reasoning abilities, and empathetic stance with the expertise of others to understand the world. Belenky et al. state:

> Constructivists seek to stretch the outer boundaries of their consciousness--by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them . . . .Constructivists become passionate knowers, knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known. (1986, p.141)

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) conclude their study of women and their search for knowledge by encouraging educators to help women develop their voices by structuring learning experiences which emphasize connections, understanding, and collaboration. They encourage an attitude of respect and patience, so that women will be empowered to utilize their unique ways of knowing by applying analytical and intuitive insights to the task at hand. In short, Belenky et al. urge educators to be catalysts for women to find their voices.

The most recent study of women's development was completed by Daniel and Judy Levinson shortly before his death in 1994. Levinson recognized that the inclusion of women in his first study of adult development, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (1978), would not do justice to members of either sex and would, most likely, reflect a male bias (Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Instead, he encouraged independent and mixed gender studies as a goal to fuller understanding of adult behavior. The Levinsons studied fifteen homemakers, fifteen

corporate career women, and fifteen women with academic careers in order to determine if these women experienced a life cycle similar to or different from that of men. Additionally, the Levinson study looked to establish a basis to assert adult development patterns and to examine the role which gender might play in that process.

*The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (1996) reports the outcome of Levinson and Levinson's research on women:

> To my surprise, the findings indicate that *women go through the same sequence of eras as men, and at the same ages*. There is, in short, a single human life cycle through which all our lives evolve, with myriad variations related to gender, class, race, culture, historical epoch, specific circumstances, and genetics. (p. 5)

Levinson and Levinson (1996) explain the developmental tasks of the life cycle as structured periods of learning interrupted by transitional periods which result in growth and change. Each of the transitions requires the modification, or *termination*, of a lifestyle established around certain values and decisions; *individuation*, or resolution of dichotomies in the human existence; and the building, or *initiation*, of a new life structure. The midpoint, labeled individuation, involves coming to grips with existing tensions which are parts of the human condition which Levinson labels: "*Young/Old, Destruction/Creation, Masculine/Feminine, Engagement/Separateness*" (1996, p. 32). Depending upon the nature of the transition, it may be experienced as a natural adaptation to circumstances or a developmental crisis. Each person experiences the stresses of the transition period differently, as each brings unique experiences, perspectives, and internal or external support

systems to the task at hand.

Levinson and Levinson (1996) assert that a gender perspective influences the means by which various life tasks are perceived. They propose a concept of "gender splitting," to describe the fact that "men and women have lived in different social worlds and have differed remarkably in their social roles, identities, and psychological attributes" (p. 38). The split between the role expectations, work expectations, and spheres of operation (domestic or public) have resulted in "inequalities that limit the adult development of women as well as men" (p. 38). Thus, while Levinson and Levinson contend that the life cycles of men and women follow similar stages of development and utilize similar processes for resolution, they conclude that societal expectations and historical roles have resulted in inequalities of the sexes and the perceived differences between the men and women.

One important difference between men and women which is identified by Levinson and Levinson (1996) is resolution of the Dream that motivates, energizes, and gives meaning to an individual's life. In Levinson's earlier study on men, it was evident that mentors played an important role in helping men fulfill their Dream, and that spouses or significant women were supporting cast in this enterprise (1976). Levinson and Levinson's 1996 study of career women indicated that a variety of factors influence a woman's ability or inability to find meaning in her life:

> To achieve the goals is to realize the Dream. Some persons, however, pursue goals that do not stem from the private Dream. A young woman may have a clear Dream yet renounce it, temporarily or permanently, in order to pursue other, more pragmatic goals favored by her family and social world.

> She may have an inchoate Dream yet be unable, for various reasons, to give it conscious meaning and to translate it into concrete goals. She may never have felt free to ask, 'What do I really want for myself?' A person cannot afford the luxury of a Dream if she is totally occupied with survival in a barren environment or with conformity to a life scenario that leaves no room for personal choice--a widespread experience of young women. (p. 239)

This internal or external limitation on women may provide insight into the influx of women entering higher education classes at less traditional ages.

These studies have helped to create a new mind set about the adult years, enhancing our understanding of the re-entry student. When Gould comments on his research, he notes that it helped to bring

> home the obvious fact that *adulthood is not a plateau;* rather, it is a dynamic and changing time for all of us. As we grow and change we take steps *away* from childhood and *toward* adulthood--steps such as marriage, work, consciously developing a talent or buying a home. With each step, the unfinished business of childhood intrudes, disturbing our emotions and requiring psychological work. With this in mind, adults may now view their disturbed feelings at particular periods as a possible sign of progress, as part of their attempted movement toward a fuller life. (1978, p. 14)

While strides have been made, studies related to the adult development of women are criticized on a number of fronts. Clearly, many of these studies focus on married mothers who did not work outside the home (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Tittle & Denker, 1980), and

fail to explore the experiences of minorities or individuals in lower socio-economic brackets (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). In addition, given the changing social structures and apparent flexibility of major life events, it is difficult to develop a theory which works as nicely as it may have in times when roles determined by gender, status, economics, cultural or religious affiliation were more rigidly established and adhered to.

Richter-Antion (1990) notes an additional concern regarding the use of developmental stages to understand re-entry students. Namely, she contends that the years which typically define the traditional college student (18 to 24 years) constitute a fairly narrow and well defined period of early adulthood. Although individuals in this group will surely display a range of human behavior, a bell curve may be assumed on many ventures as the cohort confronts similar problems or issues. However, the range of ages for re-entry students (25 to 105+) represents a variety of different developmental ages and life events. Generalizations about this group by age or major accomplishments are foolhardy and minimally productive.

The life cycle or adult development response to the re-entry woman student is often found in the literature on women's centers and empowerment programs. These programs offer workshops and support as women attempt to understand the transitions, interpersonal skills, and career abilities which will help them reach their goals. Among other initiatives, these programs and centers have developed new academic configurations and student services, created assertiveness training and conflict resolution workshops, offered faculty in-services to deal with the mature female student, established offices of continuing education for women, and introduced credit bearing women's studies programs (Brootkowski, 1989;

Eliason, 1981).

Interestingly, studies of adult development related to re-entry students have developed as adult cohort groups have faced new challenges caused by demographic shifts (Little, 1995; O'Brien & Merisotis, 1996 ). One group of interest is composed of the rising population aged 40 or beyond who represent the height of the twentieth century "baby boom." A second group is the increasing number of people living actively beyond retirement into their 70s and 80s. O'Brien and Merisotis report that:

> Between 1970 and 1993, the enrollment of students 40 and older in all sectors of higher education grew by 235 percent, from an estimated 477,000 to more than 1.6 million. . . . Seventy-nine percent of students over 40 are part-time students. More than half of these part-time students are enrolled at two-year public institutions. . . .The typical 40-plus student is white, female, and married. (1996, p. 14-15)

O'Brien and Merisotis contend that the personal and career circumstances of these individuals will have an important secondary influence upon higher education as they assert their independence from traditional student services and seek innovative means of meeting their workforce training and re-training needs. With this in mind, it was prudent to examine the literature on adult learning for additional insight.

## Adult Learning Research

Tennant and Pogson (1995) indicate that literature discussing intellectual capacities during the adult years is not as abundant as studies regarding life cycles and adult roles. This fact likely stemmed from the belief that upon maturity an individual's cognitive processes

either stabilized or began to decline. However, more recent studies have led to the belief that the development of intellectual capacities is a life-long process for which the key factors are experience and context. Tennant and Pogson provide a thorough review of the difficulties inherent in the study and measurement of adult intelligence given the culture and age-specific biases of current standardized tests; the differences between theoretical and practical problem solving; and the need to define intangible constructs related to wisdom, expertise, learning and behaving (1995). Brookfield commented upon the inherent difficulties almost a decade earlier, noting that:

> To specify generic principles of learning is an activity full of intellectual pitfalls. Even if we leave aside the variables of physiology, personality, and cultural background, we still have to consider the implications of those developmental theories that hold adults function in very different ways when responding to society and personal imperatives required of them in young adulthood, midlife, and old age. (1986, p. 26)

Despite these obstacles, the literature does provide direction regarding the facilitation of adult learning. One of the first research attempts to develop principles of adult learning was published by Knox in 1977. His work concluded that adults have a boundless ability to learn "given time, persistence, and assistance" (Knox, 1977, p. 469). Knox found that the context, content, and pace of learning influenced the success of the individual engaged in the activity.

While this learning occurs in formal and informal arenas, the individuals Knox surveyed indicated a reverence for institutionalized educational experiences, and greater success in

formal learning endeavors was correlated with the recency and achievement experienced in earlier programs of study. Knox (1977) also found that learners were more successful when allowed to move at their own pace and when a connection was made with earlier learning experiences.

Smith (1982) extended Knox's observations of learning for adults by noting that they carry to the process several important characteristics which result in different approaches to learning and the material being learned. First, having multiple roles and responsibilities, the adult learner is often more pragmatic about what is to be learned, how it will be learned, and the applicability of the new knowledge or skill to the needs of the adult's life. Second, the adult learner has experiences in his or her behavioral repertoire which help define a preferred learning environment and method. Third, as adults operate in the various life cycle transition phases, the change brings new understandings of the world and their personal histories. Finally, Smith contends that learning can be stressful for adults, as it often results in or accompanies changes which may be threatening.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) added to earlier studies by identifying the adult learner's need for organized materials, recognition of varying learning styles, and an environment which is affirming of the learner while offering opportunities for active participation and meaningful applications to daily issues.

Brookfield (1986) builds a case for the importance of self-directed learning for adults. Brookfield carefully defines autonomous and self-directed as much more than a learner squirreled away in a library carrel or fastidiously identifying learning objectives and assessment standards for his or her work. Rather, Brookfield contends that the self-directed

adult learner is involved in both an internal change in consciousness and knowing the world and the external mapping of learning activities. For Brookfield, "The most fully adult form of self-directed learning . . . is one in which critical reflection . . . the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances are all present" (1986, pp. 58-59). Thus, self-directed learning is a connected, process-oriented, interaction of content and meaning as the individual comes to know and influence the world and his or her place in it.

The facilitation of adult learning, in Brookfield's model, involves "assisting adults to free themselves from externally imposed direction in their learning and encouraging them to become proactive, initiating individuals in reshaping their personal, work, political, and recreational lives" (1986, p. 60). For Brookfield, this facilitation involves "presenting alternatives, questioning givens, and scrutinizing the self" (1986, p. 125), a process which may, at times, be uncomfortable. Since respect is key to each educational encounter, a learner who is unwilling or unable to accept the challenge of critical thinking should not be coerced beyond the point he or she is willing to tread. However, several researchers note that significant learning is often the result of wrestling with a problem (Daloz, 1986; Keane, 1987; Weiser, 1987). As Brookfield noted in his essay, *Facilitating Adult Learning:*

> . . . it is salutary to remember, then, that learners recall with pride, and in vivid detail, those episodes and moments when they faced, contended with, and resolved some activity, task or circumstance that was challenging and problematic. (1989, p. 206)

While Brookfield offers an often cerebral look at the theory, cognitive processes and

outcomes of learning during the adult years, Jerold Apps provides a very hands-on look at adult learning. In the early 1980s, Apps recognized that the students in his graduate and undergraduate courses were older and began to study the "quiet revolution" which was steadily changing higher education. Reviewing the case, Apps identified nine exemplary teaching principles held by instructors who positively influence student success. These include:

1. Learn to know your students.
2. Use the students' experiences as class content.
3. When possible, tie theory to practice.
4. Provide a climate conducive to learning.
5. Offer a variety of formats.
6. Offer a variety of techniques.
7. Provide students feedback on their progress.
8. Help students acquire [educational] resources.
9. Be available to students for out-of-class contacts. (Apps, 1981, pp. 145-146)

This list makes good sense in light of the re-entry woman student and the barriers, concerns, life-cycle issues, and learning theories discussed previously.

Apps continued his interest in the adult student, using his ideas to encourage other educators to move out of the standard paradigm for learning. In *Understanding Adult Learners* (1991), Apps provided a valuable summary of adult learner characteristics which were evident in the literature and apparent in his classrooms. He reiterated the importance of the unique history and experience which each adult brings to his or her understanding of

the teacher's communications and techniques and how the learner organizes and processes that information. Apps stressed the great variation in individual learning styles and encouraged educators to help students think in new ways by teaching in new ways. The summary confirms that adult learners "prefer some control over the place, pace, and time they learn" (Apps, 1991, p. 41) as they try to fit formal education into already full schedules.

Apps also examined other issues which make learning different for adults than children or traditionally aged learners. Their motivation for engaging in learning is different, often the result of a "trigger event" in their lives (Aslanian & Bricknell, 1980), career advancement opportunities, or personal interests (Apps, 1991). Apps affirmed psychological and biological barriers to learning that adults bring to the classroom: lack of confidence, declining vision, poorer hearing, and generally slower response times. The last point in Apps's list highlights the need for practical application of materials for the adult learner. He notes: "historically, educators have worked on the assumption that what young people learn now will be useful to them in some indefinite future. For most adults the future is now" (Apps, 1991, p. 42).

## Women Speak for Themselves:

## The Voices of Re-Entry Community College Women in the Literature

The struggles to provide a framework for understanding the experiences of adult students have merged with additional research to provide a broadened perspective on re-entry students in general. Although their return to higher education was originally seen as a response to identity development or trauma, in 1982 Lynn Burnham offered a rather

refreshing perspective:

> I would speculate that the main reasons adults are returning to post-secondary education in unprecedented numbers is that they have no practical reason to retain an inherited value system that limits education to the young and locks the not-young into production and then retirement. People have discovered that they can be multi-participatory rather than restricted about life's activities. Continuing this general idea, it would seem that human impulses to grow, to find security, and to experience the new are all addressed when adults return to education. (p. 24)

The studies of the 1980s led educators, sociologists, psychologists, and others to new levels of examination. The similarities between male and female adult re-entry students were acknowledged and recognized. In addition, the differences between male and female reentry students were examined in light of new theories of female behavior promoted by feminist researchers and thinkers. Thus, a greater acceptance appeared for what was the same, and an effort was afoot to truly understand the unique experiences of women differently from those of men.

Barbara Townsend (1992) notes that feminist theory concerns itself with the balance of power between the sexes and resultant oppression based upon gender, and she cautions that a variety of theoretical orientations are currently influencing feminist thought. While dedicated to the advancement of women, feminists theorists may disagree upon whether differences between men and women are biologically or sociologically driven; they may debate the question of whether equality is possible or desirable; or they may discuss

patriarchal, capitalistic, or political systems as the basis for our failure to move toward an androgynous society. Townsend notes that these debates are influenced by the "stances or generations or phases" (1992, p.3) through which feminist thought has traveled. She summarizes this notion as follows:

> First generation feminists strive for equality with men. . . .Second generation feminists . . . emphasize and celebrate women's uniqueness and wish to bring what is special about women into the mainstream. Third generation feminists reflect upon the goals and accomplishments of the first two. . . more cognizant of the variations in women's experiences because of differences in race, ethnicity, social class, sexual preferences, marital status, and physical condition. (1992, p.3)

Again, despite varying perspectives, the feminist scholar is united in his or her effort to view women as separate and unique from men. To reach this end, Townsend contends that feminist scholars in education look to articulate the everyday activities and experiences of women as valuable in and of themselves, and not in relation to a standard of behavior or thinking set by men. "They generally prefer qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis, partly because these methods allow for a researcher-subject relationship consonant with feminists' desire to end the oppression of women" (Townsend, 1992, p. 7).

Recent studies have taken up this gauntlet in an effort to understand and celebrate women in higher education. A number of these studies have focused on community college students. Elisabeth Hayes and Daniele Flannery's *Adult Women's Learning in Higher Education: A Critical Review of Scholarship* provides an interesting analytic perspective on

the limited volume and often low quality of research that gives voice to issues related to women's learning. While critical of the inconsistent use of terms, homogeneous samples, inappropriate assumptions and comparisons, and potentially inappropriate generalization of characteristics often found in the literature on adult women students, they found that "three themes were evident in these articles: women's self-doubts, women as silenced, and women as 'connected' learners" (1995, p. 34).

Similarly, Jean Saul (1992) "consider[ed] women's experience within the feminist teaching methodology and the adult education frameworks. . ." (p.44). Her study involved in-depth interviews of seventeen multi-national students who were engaged in various levels of higher education. While she noted the inherent flaws of her study, she also identified four themes which pervaded the women's reports. The first theme suggested by the women in Saul's study is that professors' attitudes and actions set a climate for learning. When faculty were encouraging, supportive guides to the educational experience, the students reported feeling challenged and valued; conversely, when faculty were condescending or uninterested, students reported decreased participation levels, accompanied by increased levels of depression and isolation (Saul, 1992, pp.48-49).

Since faculty are only one part of the teaching/learning equation, it is not surprising that Saul's study identified a second theme that centered on student involvement in the learning process. Re-entry women students reported that when they took control of their response to the learning situation, selecting topics of interest for papers or completing recommended as well as required reading, their satisfaction with the educational experience was enhanced (1992, p. 47).

The third point raised by the women Saul interviewed emphasized their belief that prior experiences enriched the quality of the learning opportunity. These women were able to draw from life experiences in both personal and professional arenas to provide a framework for the theories and skills which were being explored in the classroom (1992, pp. 47-48).

The final theme unearthed by Saul's study reflects the importance of providing information about women's lives and achievements in order to encourage the success of re-entry women students. Integrating the contributions and accomplishments of women into the standard curriculum provides feminine role models and validates the ability of women to succeed in various endeavors (1992, p.49).

Recent studies of community college women have permitted women's voices to be heard through classroom assignments, particularly writing classrooms. Susan Nugent (1993), began to consider her classroom style when female students reported a sense of being undervalued on their evaluation of instruction forms. She drew parallels between her students' progress in developing a strong and confident voice with the stages of "knowing" proposed in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's book, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986): silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge.

Student journals, observations and discussions provided Nugent with insight into her female students and helped her design strategies to deal with women at each stage. For instance, the silenced woman was encouraged through individual conferences; the received knower was challenged to think for herself; and the subjective knower was encouraged to

think beyond her own experience. In composition and literature classes, Nugent found that procedural knowers are quick to utilize analytical strategies and approaches which form the basis for introductory courses; whereas the constructed knowers are able to extend the classroom experience "to synthesize their knowledge and experiences using appropriate procedures to construct their words" (1993, p.6). In short, for the woman with a well-developed voice, intuition and experience often combine creatively with subject matter and procedures to construct a new and dynamic way of viewing and acting in the world.

Gretchen Starks (1989) studied seventeen rural community college women and the processes they used in deciding whether to persist or drop out. Her study utilized "exceptional cases," meaning "those who persisted even though they were initially identified as 'high risk' by the college and therefore not predicted to persist, and those who left in spite of initial identification as 'low risk' students by the college and therefore predicted to graduate" (p.1). This study discovered a number of recurring themes, including one which centered upon college writing and writing assignments. Starks discovered that institutional persisters valued and drew confidence from writing assignments which challenged them to articulate and explore their "feelings, goals, and thoughts" (p. 5). For these students, writing became an opportunity for analytic thought and self-awareness. The students who did not persist, on the other hand, did not have positive experiences with college writing assignments. Their dissatisfactions ranged from requirements of typed formats to low faculty standards of review of written materials. Starks's study concludes that college writing across the curriculum can be beneficial in helping female students identify their strengths and articulate potential barriers to their success.

Mary O'Sullivan (1995) examined women's voices and expectations using case studies of two-year college students grappling with computer literacy and technology. O'Sullivan built a case that literacy--or ease of communicating easily through written symbols--is often bounded by class, culture, and gender factors in which the value to others determines the extent to which literacy is encouraged and developed. Extending this thought, she argued that computer technology, or literacy, provide additional means of limiting or expanding women's abilities to know and understand themselves. O'Sullivan noted that the emphasis must move beyond traditional women's roles of producing information through word processing or spreadsheets, to active involvement in computer-mediated communication. The results of her study of college women and technology urge us to:

> . . . move beyond binary opposition stances posing questions of "are women or men better with computers?" Or, "are more women than men afraid of computers?" More meaningful questions are concerned with whether women's education will lead them to be skilled in the new forms of thinking and communicating, and whether they will be involved in shaping the way computer-mediated communication develops. (p.28)

Nancy LaPaglia's book, *Storytellers: The Image of the Two-Year College in American Fiction and in Women's Journals* (1994), provides one of the most extensive studies of community college re-entry women available today. She utilizes her own experiences as a community college graduate and faculty member to examine the image of two-year colleges in fiction and in the minds and experiences of re-entry women students and their faculty. She writes from a feminist perspective about "those inside the system, affected

by it and familiar with it, but who have been unheard" (p. 58).

LaPaglia analyzed the journal entries provided by twenty-two re-entry women students and one traditionally aged student from five different community colleges in the United States. The women were diverse in interests, culture, geographical affiliations, educational experience and family configurations. Four major themes were noted across the writing of this student group, which LaPaglia labeled Agency, Marginality, Joy of Learning and Juggling. Agency referred to the intentionality among this group of women to "gain some control over their lives," and their determination "to lead a thoughtful life instead of one that just happens." As LaPaglia put it, "they do not see themselves as losers or drifters, but as active participants in planning their own futures, even though they may not always succeed" (p. 67).

The Marginality theme was evident in the women's awareness of being low status students at low status institutions of higher learning. The students expressed awareness of their marginality as women, as members of a particular ethnic group, as non-traditionally aged students, as single parents, or as physically disabled individuals. Yet, the metaphor these students used to describe their connection with the lowly community college ("where they are registered, at great personal cost and effort" (p.74)) is the "step." Students variously mentioned the community college as a "step up," a "step toward," a "step waiting to be taken," the "right step," or a "step away from poor self-esteem" (p.76).

The Joy of Learning theme was mentioned by students and faculty alike. This theme evoked personal and individual situations in which the student recognized and articulated her enhanced sense of being intelligent, successful, contributing role models in their

classrooms and families. Surely, LaPaglia reports, the Joy of Learning was balanced by the stress and turmoil that accompanied the college venture; however, the dominant theme of growth and improvement overshadowed these concerns.

Finally, students in this study reported the constant Juggling of their lives. Families, unanticipated assignments, financial crises, institutional bureaucracy, and myriad other issues intruded upon these students in their efforts to reach their goals.

LaPaglia's study is an interesting discourse regarding the perceptions and experiences of re-entry women and the image of community colleges. She builds a case for strong, goal driven women surmounting real odds to achieve their educational goals. The vehicle for this success is the two-year community college. LaPaglia's attempt "to make the invisible more visible and the maligned more valued by their detractors" (p.157) does not offer any solutions to the community college re-entry woman's sense of Marginality or need to Juggle. It does, however, highlight themes of Agency and Joy of Learning which are noticeably absent from much of the literature on re-entry women students.

Other qualitative studies which shed light on the re-entry women experience do propose several directions as a result of their work. Sandria Rodriguez exhorts postsecondary educators to recruit re-entry women for educational --rather than monetary-- reasons, noting that "they add a rich dimension to the classroom and often serve as models of maturity for traditional-aged students" (1996, p.7). Among other suggestions, she urges administrators to hire women faculty in male-dominated disciplines to serve as mentors to women students in these fields and encourages faculty to incorporate feminine epistemological models into classroom methodologies (Rodriguez, 1996; Saul, 1992).

Finally, we are encouraged to recognize the great need to engage in research regarding women's learning in higher education in order to more fully understand the phenomenon (Hayes & Flannery, 1995; Rodriguez, 1996; Saul, 1992).

## Reflections on the Literature Review

This study sought to describe and explicate the experiences of re-entry women in community colleges from the graduate's perspective in order to enrich and extend the current body of research on re-entry women students in higher education. It represents a return to the investigation of a unique and growing student population--re-entry women. The re-entry woman student phenomenon was heavily investigated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it became evident that this student group had the time, interest, ability and, oftentimes, the need to engage in the educational challenges of college which were deferred for a variety of personal, social or economic reasons. Flaming this interest was the recognition by college and university administrators that re-entry women were financially independent or aid-eligible and could be recruited in numbers which somewhat offset the declining enrollments of more traditionally aged student groups. Early studies focused on the factors which drove women to the college setting, or barriers which drove them away from higher education. Moreover, many early studies used quantitative data to identify trends which might be useful in dealing with this new educational phenomena. And, most frequently, the data reflected the responses of re-entry women in four-year college and university programs. This is not meant to be critical of the important research that occurred during this early period; it merely reflects the state of higher education and the state of research at that time. In the 1970s and 1980s, community colleges were still novices in the higher education arena; they were

actively working to develop their missions, policies, procedures and institutional identities in the modern world. Community colleges were--and are today--primarily teaching institutions. Research on student groups was left to the scholars in more hallowed halls of academe.

When the presence of re-entry woman students in higher education came to be seen as more of an asset than an anomaly, research on this group took a slightly different turn. Rather than the "why (are they here)?" and "what (should we do)?" questions of earlier research endeavors, the literature began to shift toward attempts to understand the societal shifts and those re-entry women responses which were creating and fostering this new student phenomenon. New questions, such as: "What is happening in the family?", "How are women's roles and attitudes changing?", "What is the college doing to thwart the re-entry woman's success?" and "How are re-entry women undermining their own chances for success?" became the foundation for rich studies of adult learning and conducive environments. Studies began to compare the re-entry woman with more traditional students or their re-entry male student counterparts.

These studies found that re-entry women in higher education are diverse in their motivations, preparation, backgrounds, financial strength, cultural values, ages and support systems. They bring to their studies a variety of personal, family and psychological pressures which may variously handicap or facilitate their success. In general, re-entry women defied tight description. Despite this fact, studies on re-entry women students have failed to acknowledge the diversity of this group and examine in any depth the unique experiences of women who are not white, middle class students entering traditional female fields of study.

There is no doubt that these studies made significant contributions to the literature on re-entry women students. However, they typically focused on students in a single four-year college or university, or represented broader studies that relied upon students' reported perceptions of their experiences as recorded on forms which facilitated quantitative analysis. These studies often attempted to define the re-entry woman student experience through comparisons or by describing the differences between them and members of other student groups. The experiences of these students were explicated, but the rich variations or subtle tones of their voices were lost in the number crunching and forced-choice options of quantitative research. The recent influx of qualitative research involving the re-entry woman student has typically been limited to a single institution, and often tied to a particular learning process or program of study within that institution.

No less importantly, these studies primarily examined the re-entry woman's experience *while she was living it.* The immediacy of the situation was potentially a valuable component or a confounding variable. It is likely that a woman in the throes of childbirth will have a very different analysis of the activity's problems and benefits than she may recount one month or one year after the child is born. Similarly, some of the positive or negative value of a college education may only be realized in retrospect, after the quality of the individual's life is assessed in conjunction with the outcomes of the experience. Retrospective data regarding the community college experience of re-entry women has not been evident in the literature. While some studies may have assessed a student's particular perceptions of the services and programs of one institution, studies examining the experiences of re-entry women students in community colleges were not found.

This study recognized the community colleges and the students who were matriculating through their "open door" portals as important forces shaping American higher education. While literature on community college students is generally sparse, Laden and Turner (1995) easily condense the literature on women in two-year colleges when they write "in light of women's increasing college-going participation and associate degree completion, to what degree has the role of women students been addressed in the community college literature? The answer might be summed up in two words: not much" (p. 16). Perhaps that is because the re-entry woman is viewed from so many dichotomous perspectives. Perhaps it is because she is a phenomenon that has not been well described, and, therefore, cannot be well understood. This study was undertaken in an effort to aid in the description of the adult re-entry woman in community colleges, while also drawing upon the many perspectives of the literature to make sense of the intriguing phenomena under review.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

This study of re-entry women in a community college setting utilized a qualitative approach to understand and describe participants' experiences from their unique perspectives as successful graduates. This chapter addresses the research design and methods that were employed in this study, including its sampling strategy, data collection procedures, analysis processes, and methods used to safeguard the trustworthiness of results. In addition, limitations to the study are identified.

## Rationale for the Research Method

Many studies addressing the experiences of college students have involved surveys or tests of large groups of representative samples in order to determine the "average" or "most frequent" experiences, perspectives, or preferences of this subject pool. While quantitative studies have formed a backbone for our understanding of college students, it is evident that massed data which is reduced to statistical significance masks the unique voice and telling experiences of those individuals being studied. For these reasons, this study utilized qualitative methods to give voice to and make sense of the re-entry woman student's experience *as she had come to understand it*. This study describes both the "routine and problematic moments and meanings in the individuals' lives" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2) during their college years.

## Phenomenological Approach to Inquiry

A phenomenological study focuses on a concept--or phenomenon--in order to understand how the individuals give meaning to their experience in relation to this concept (Creswell, 1998). In phenomenology, perceptions are the unquestioned source of knowledge regarding a particular experience (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Moustakas, 1994). These perceptions are explicated through interaction with others who seek to understand the speaker's point of view and interpretations of his or her experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Phenomenological research provides the holistic examination of a concept from a variety of perspectives, recognizing that the evident horizon of understanding will shift as one approaches it from another angle or dimension (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological studies begin with descriptions of experiences and utilize reflection, intuition, and analysis to come to understandings and beliefs that might be applied to the subject at hand. "Put simply and directly, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question 'What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?'" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). This study probed the "structure and essence" of the experience of eighteen re-entry women students who graduated from community colleges.

## Research Design

This study was descriptive in nature, seeking to identify the behaviors, events, attitudes, and beliefs of re-entry women students in community colleges. It also was exploratory in its effort to discover the themes and patterns that emerge as re-entry women students in community colleges make sense of their experiences. To facilitate the exploration

and description of the re-entry women student phenomenon, a multiple case study strategy was employed that utilized in-depth interviews as the primary research tool (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Multi-Case Study

Qualitative research is based upon a flexible design which, in this case, seeks to tease out the salient features of the re-entry student experience for women in community colleges. For this purpose, the perspectives of eighteen graduates who studied at urban, suburban, or rural community colleges in Illinois were solicited through in-depth interviews of their collegiate experiences. Six graduates (each representing an individual case) at each of three different community colleges (representing different case study sites) were used in this study.

Sampling Strategy

This study utilized purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy, ensuring that the cases were "information-rich" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) in terms of the community college experience which was investigated. This type of sampling allowed two kinds of analyses. The first examined individual cases and the unique features of the re-entry woman student experience; the second looked across cases to identify themes which were shared by the diverse members of the participant pool. Snowball sampling was employed, utilizing referrals from three host institutions and inviting referred graduates to nominate potential participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Three Illinois community colleges were contacted to request nominations and information related to female graduates of their institutions who met certain criteria. After contacting graduates who

volunteered to participate in the study, they were asked to identify other graduates from their urban, suburban or rural community colleges who might be included in the study.

Participants in the study shared three common criteria: gender (female), college type (community college), and an elapsed time frame of five or less years between graduation and the interview. Other purposive sampling criteria, including age, race/ethnicity, college setting, field of study, employment status, student status, family education, and socioeconomic status, were balanced among the participants as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Purposive Sampling Criteria for Selection of Individual Cases

| Criteria for Selection of Cases | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Age | The age of participants in the study as divided by the major adult transitions identified by Levinson et al. (1978): 28-39; 40-50; 51-65; and, if possible, 65+ |
| Race/Ethnicity | The racial/ethnic background of the participants: Black, Hispanic, Native American, White, Asian/Pacific Islander |
| Community College Geographical Characteristics | The Illinois community college attended by the participant: urban, suburban, or rural |

| Criteria for Selection of Cases | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Field of Study | The category of study in which the participant completed a degree, including various programs within the vocational or transfer education rubrics |
| Employment | The employment status of the individual (not employed, employed part-time, or employed full-time) before, during or upon completion of studies |
| Student Status | The full or part-time study status of the graduates while studying at the community college |
| Family Education | The number of participants who are first generation college students and the number who are not first generation college students |
| Socioeconomic Status | The self reported socioeconomic class to which each participant belongs: Upper; Upper-Middle; Middle; Lower-Middle; Lower |

While soliciting the study participants, the various characteristics were balanced as

equally as possible among the members of the final sample group. Six participants were identified from each institution, resulting in a total of eighteen subjects. Given their intimate connection with the community college, current or former college staff members were not considered as participants in this study.

## Data Collection Procedures

The first step in this process was to garner the permission of three community colleges to conduct research utilizing their graduates and to access their graduate information for the purpose of soliciting participants. This permission was solicited through the appropriate offices at the respective institutions, with written consent secured from the chief academic officer or the chief student affairs officer. Once nominations for participants were received, the graduates were contacted by telephone and sent a written invitation to participate that described the purposes and the study and their role in it. After this written contact, a follow-up contact was made to affirm participation and to arrange an interview location and date. The written correspondence regarding participation requests is found in Appendix A.

The primary method of data collection involved face-to-face interviews with the participants. The interviews began with casual conversation and a description of the research goals, methods, and parameters. The confidentiality of the participant was ensured and permission to tape the interview was re-confirmed in writing. After establishing rapport, a "purposive conversation" was conducted to "gather descriptive data in the subject's own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 135) their community college experiences.

Patton (1990) notes: "qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (p. 278). One to two- hour interviews were conducted with each participant to elicit her perspectives, experiences, and understandings of her years of study at the community college level. A general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990) was used to structure the interview session, using a general outline of issues and events to be discussed which was developed before the interviews began (see Appendix B). These issues were sometimes addressed in different sequences or using different verbiage with various participants; however, the outline ensured that each participant provided a perspective on all of the topics considered relevant to the study. These topics included the ways in which re-entry women describe and interpret their community college experiences; the extent to which this sub-population articulates similar or dissimilar experiences; and the characteristics of the educational environment that re-entry women students believe contributed to the value of their community college experiences.

This general interview outline allowed the participant to direct the flow of the conversation while ensuring that important issues were addressed in the limited time available. In some cases, other issues were introduced by individual participants, but were not addressed by the researcher unless the participant raised the issue (Patton, 1990). Interviews were held at times and locations that were convenient for each participant and that allowed audio taping with minimal interference. Interview settings included university libraries, participants' homes, public restaurants and community college offices or classrooms.

In addition to the interview comments, the participants were invited to bring to the

interview any documents that they felt symbolized their community college experiences. They brought student papers, photography portfolios, awards program brochures, class assignments, transcripts and project displays. These materials provided valuable insights, as they represented

> . . . a stable source of information, both in the sense that they may accurately reflect situations that occurred at some time in the past and that they can be analyzed and reanalyzed without undergoing changes in the interim. . . . [and] they are a rich source of information, contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 277)

In order to facilitate the examination of eighteen participant interview transcripts and documentary materials, a research log was maintained as an ongoing chronicle of the research activities and a depository for reflections, observations, and details which were considered important to the study findings (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991).

## Data Analysis

Qualitative inquiry places the researcher and the study participants in a partnership relationship designed to describe and understand a particular phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) described a process which he calls a "modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data" (p. 121). This process calls for the researcher to begin the analysis by fully describing his or her own experience of the phenomenon as it is described and explicated by the study participants. Then, the interviews provide the fountain from which significant statements describing the experience are unearthed and a list

of all nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements is developed. Moustakas (1994) calls this classification process the "horizonalization" of the data. This information is then clustered into units of meaning which depict themes. The interpretation of the material then calls for a "textural description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced" (Creswell, 1998, p. 55). These interpretations are used to design a description of the essence of the experience under study (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). This process is applied to each participant, after which a "composite" portrait is developed (Creswell, 1998).

In this study the three main research questions were probed through an interview protocol which divided into fifty-six units of description regarding the re-entry woman's community college experience. Each of these units was recorded, and each transcript was reviewed to identify nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping responses to each unit of inquiry. Key words and phrases from the responses were recorded for the individual participants and grouped according to their institution. These responses were then sifted to identify clusters answering the "what and how" questions which form the basis of the phenomenological interpretation. Once the essence of each unit was distilled for each participant and each participating institution, nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping themes from each participant group were then listed in a similar fashion for the total pool of responses. This resulted in a synthesized description of the unit experienced. As an example, the question "why did you choose (name of institution) for your studies?" yielded eighteen responses with multiple levels. These responses were sifted to eight themes, including prior experience, location, cost, limited options, a safe testing ground, special programs, ease of entry, and reputation

of the institution. The composite picture is one of students seeking a comfortable and safe educational setting with reduced risk of failure. Several questions or units of questions approached this issue from various angles in order to ensure validity of the responses and complete the composite of the wider experience being examined.

To successfully complete this phenomenological analysis of the re-entry woman's experience in the community college, it was necessary for the researcher to "bracket" her prior experiences and observations of the concept under study by adopting "Epoche," the Greek word meaning distance (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) observed:

> As I reflect on the nature and meaning of the Epoche, I see it as a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. The Epoche is a way of looking and being, an unfettered stance. (p. 85)

The researcher's experience and connection with the particular concept under study is the starting point from which phenomenological research emanates (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, after bracketing the concept and engaging in epoche, the phenomenologist focuses on his or her meanings of the experience and then explores "intersubjective validity" through the lived experiences of other individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

This researcher had encountered re-entry women students in the four-year college

sector as an undergraduate colleague in the 1970s and a Student Development professional in the 1980s. These experiences, while dated, strengthened the mandate that prior history be bracketed and the concept of Epoche embraced. To ensure this process, the researcher identified her impressions, observations, and responses to re-entry women as peers and as learners requiring various services to enhance their college years. The phenomenon was considered in light of the cultural dynamics of the preceding decades and the dramatic changes in role, economy, opportunity and responsibility that have arisen for women of mature age. These reflections enhanced the distance of those prior experiences and perceptions from the re-entry women being examined in this research. The gap was further broadened by the inclusion of minority women and women enduring economic hardships--characteristics which were significantly absent from the researcher's prior experience. In addition, the study of community college women, and graduates of these colleges added an unknown dimension to the researcher's possible preconceptions.

The researcher's efforts to approach each interview anew was rewarded by novel responses to questions for which the answers could possibly have been predicted. After each interview, a brief description of the participant was recorded to set in the researcher's mind the appearance, style, and tenor of each interview. Also recorded were the "surprises" that arose with each interview, helping the researcher step back from each interview and participant in order to objectively record each participant's experience. In addition, frequent opportunities for clarification, questions, or reflections were provided in order to ensure that the re-entry woman's experience was the primary voice of the interview. Opportunities for additional clarification and observations were collected as the transcripts were audited by

each participant and returned to the researcher.

## Trustworthiness and Ethics

Research is undertaken in order to contribute to a body of knowledge in a particular field. Key to this activity is the production of knowledge that can be trusted by those who wish to apply it to a particular setting or population. Thus, the researcher must ensure that the findings correspond to reality, a difficult task in the case of the qualitative researcher who believes that reality is socially constructed with subjective interpretations assigned by individuals to the meanings of events and circumstances in their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Merriam asserted that "the qualitative researcher is interested in perspectives rather than truth per se, and it is the researcher's obligation to present 'a more or less honest rendering of how informants actually view themselves and their experiences'(Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 98)" (1988, p. 168).

To ensure this is the case, several strategies were employed in this study. To begin with, multiple data sources and methods were utilized in order to ensure trustworthy results. This strategy, referred to as "triangulation" in the literature, brings together data from different sources to illuminate, clarify, or substantiate the research findings (Erlandson, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In this study, triangulation occurred through the use of multiple interviewees and methods (interviews and document analysis). To further enhance the trustworthiness of the study's findings, member checks were utilized, with every research participant asked to review a verbatim transcript of her interview for accuracy (Merriam, 1988). Finally, this study makes use of "thick description" in an effort to allow participants' own voices to dominate and direct the study's findings, providing

further evidence of the trustworthiness of the data presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In addition to the researcher's concern that the data be viewed honestly, the issue of the reliability of the research is raised by advocates of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Merriam, 1988). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the traditional term *reliability* may not be appropriate for qualitative research, and suggest that language such as *consistency* or *dependability* be used in its place. Therefore, the qualitative perspective on reliability--or dependability--relies less on the replication of results from one study to another, and focuses on whether or not the results are consistent with the data collected. As Yin (1984) stated: "the emphasis is on doing the *same* case over again, not on 'replicating' the results of one case by doing *another* case study. The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in the study" (p. 45). Yin recommended making "as many steps as possible as operational as possible, and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder" (1984, p. 45). The clarity of the researcher's position, triangulation of data analysis, and an audit trail (Merriam, 1988) are several techniques which were utilized to ensure dependability of the data explored in this study.

In addition to being concerned about the trustworthiness of this study, the conducting of the research in an ethical manner is of paramount interest. Merriam (1988) noted "in a qualitative case study, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge at two points: during the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings" (p. 179). Problems which may be encountered include problems of confidentiality, problems related to researcher involvement, and problems related to unclear distinctions between data and interpretations (Merriam, 1988, p. 179). Whitt (1991) discussed additional considerations surrounding responsibility,

honesty, trust, and rigor. Each of these researchers stressed the importance of open and honest communication regarding the purpose of research and respectful treatment of both the data and the participants at all stages of the study. It is believed that the distance that the participants enjoyed as graduates of the nominating community colleges who were previously unknown to the researcher reduced ethical concerns regarding undue influence or bias. The researcher maintained the highest ethical standards in the execution of this study.

## Limitations of the Study

In common with other qualitative multi-case studies, this investigation into the experiences of re-entry women in community colleges was limited by its small sample. Although the researcher attempted to ensure trustworthiness through a variety of research strategies, it is evident that eighteen community college women can provide a mere glimpse into the experiences of this widely diverse population.

A second limitation existed in the use of institutional liaisons to recommend interview participants. This practice created the possibility of systematic positive bias being associated with community college enrollment since the liaisons may have selected individuals who had good experiences with their respective institutions. However, since the study required students from different demographic regions, it was important to work with institutions from these regions to identify potential volunteer participants. It is believed that an institutional recommendation encouraged participation from individuals who were not compensated and who were unknown to the researcher. This liability was partially alleviated by the inclusion of interview participants who were recommended by graduate colleagues

rather than the institutional liaisons. Guaranteed confidentiality was key to the ability to establish a balanced picture of the community college experience.

Despite these limitations, this study is important in that it provides a richness and texture to complement the massive quantified data available on this important student sector in modern higher education.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE COLLEGES, THE WOMEN, THEIR STORIES: "YOU JUST DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO"

In 1974, Ernest Boyer dramatically captured the early vision of adult students in academe when he wrote:

> Students were expected to finish college before entering the world of work, never to return. Through this process the campus became a place where older people seemed like misfits in a strange and foreign land. And adult students were viewed as retreads in a kind of salvage operation, sadly out of step with the learning cycle and even with the life cycle itself. (p. 6)

Much has happened in the twenty-five years since Boyer's comment made its way into print. Re-entry students have demonstrated that the learning cycle does not end at young adulthood; and while education may seem like a "salvage operation" for these students, it has proven more accurately to be a type of salvation for many.

For this study, eighteen women graduates of three community colleges were interviewed in an effort to understand more fully the character and value of their community college experiences. Several themes ran through these interviews which revealed the

meaning that community college study held for these determined women.

These themes are elaborated upon in this chapter and the next in order to paint a portrait of re-entry women community college graduates that emphasizes the rich texture, variety, and courage of their experiences. This chapter is divided into three sections to set the context for the findings that follow. The first section provides a description of the individuals and the institutional settings which animate and inform this research. The second section focuses on the academic aspirations and motivations which led these women to seek community college experiences. The final section addresses why these women chose to pursue degrees at community colleges rather than other colleges and universities. With this as a foundation, Chapter 5 examines in greater depth the nature of these women's educational experiences, touching upon ways in which the women immersed themselves in their college environment, often learning as much from rich co-curricular opportunities as from structured classroom experiences. The re-entry women's perceptions of other students and views of learning process are explored. In addition, the value interviewees attached to their community college experience and how they believe they changed as a result of it are addressed.

## The Characters and Their Settings

Six graduates of each of three community colleges in Illinois agreed to participate in this study. The three community colleges were distinguished by geography, size, and

program offerings. For purposes of this study, the following pseudonyms were assigned to denote the colleges: Grant Technical College (urban), Majestic View Community College (rural), and Williams Bay County College (suburban). All of these institutions offered the traditional transfer-oriented liberal arts and sciences programs, as well as career, vocational, and adult education programs.

The eighteen women in this study represented the spectrum of re-entry women in the community college system. The average age was 45 years, with the range from 28 to 77 years. Eleven of the women interviewed were white, six were African-American and one was Hispanic. Eight of the women were married, eight were divorced, and two never married. Seventeen of the women in this study had children, with an average of 2.47 children per household. Four of the women reported handicapping disabilities, six received public assistance during their studies, and seven reported middle or upper middle class economic status.

Three of the women interviewed had completed General Education Development (GED) certificates prior to enrolling in the community college setting. Nine women reported prior experience with higher education; six of the nine had unsuccessfully attempted college immediately out of high school. Thirteen of the women indicated that they were the first in their families to go to college, although four women had children who had completed post-secondary higher degrees prior to their own enrollment at the community college. During their enrollments, five women worked full-time, three women held on-campus part-time work study positions, and two women worked or volunteered outside the home on a part-time basis.

Nine graduates completed Associate in Arts or General Studies degrees, and nine completed Associate in Science or Applied Science degrees. While most graduates attended the community college continuously, nine studied full-time and nine studied part-time. It took an average of 5.4 years for the members of this group to complete their degrees, with the range of time between 1.5 years and 15 years, and 3 years being the most frequent case. At the time of the interviews, most graduates had been out of the community college system for 1.5 years, and nine of the women had completed or were pursuing baccalaureate degrees.

While this brief overview of the institutions and individuals involved in this study is instructive, it fails to capture the more detailed information about the community colleges from which participants in this study received degrees, let alone the determination and accomplishments of these women. Accordingly, the following sections elaborate more fully on both, describing the institutions and the people who enlivened this study.

Grant Technical College (GTC)

Grant Technical College is one of seven two-year institutions in a system which serves the needs of a large metropolitan area. Located in the heart of a major urban center, over 9,000 students (full time equivalent hours of over 4,000) enrolled at GTC in the fall of 1997. Sixty-six percent of the students enrolled in credit courses, 11% enrolled in continuing education courses, and 16% enrolled in special interest classes, such as Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation, Real Estate Certification, and Certified Nurse Assistant. Serving students from almost fifty countries, fifty-seven percent of GTC's student body is female, the average age is 31 years, and seventy-eight percent of the students study part-time. Forty-four percent of the students are African American, 22% are White, 18% are Hispanic, 12% are Asians,

and the remaining 3% fall into the "other" category. Eighty-two percent of the student report being single, 71% were employed full or part-time, and 47% reported an income of less than $12,000. In 1997, 20% of the students taking credit courses reported having previously earned an associate's, bachelor's, master's, professional or doctoral degree.

Six GTC graduates were interviewed in this study. The first, Aja, is an African American woman in her early thirties. Aja took twelve years, part-time, to complete her Associate in Science degree. She had enrolled at a four-year university immediately after high school, and dropped out after conceiving her son. Aja is currently enrolled at a highly selective university in the junior year of a pre-med program.

At 57, Elese had taken three years to complete her Associate in Arts degree. She lives in public housing and is the first in her family to attend college. A breast cancer survivor, Elese has become an active advocate promoting early detection strategies among her African American sisters. She has an adult child and infant grandchild who depend upon her for assistance.

Diana, a married mother of four, is a 57-year-old African American woman. She described herself as a middle class, first generation student who decided to enroll after the business which had employed her for 36 years relocated to the Pacific Northwest. It took Diana three years to complete her associate's degree, and she is currently enrolled at an urban university completing a bachelor's degree in human resource management.

Dina was making good money in a male-dominated trade when she realized that there had to be more to life. She moved from California to the Midwest with her partner of 15 years, and enrolled full-time at GTC. Dina was an active participant in the Phi Theta Kappa

(PTK) Honor Society during the three years that it took her to complete an Associate in Arts degree with an emphasis on mathematics. At 42 years of age, Dina recently completed a baccalaureate degree in engineering at a technological institute and plans to work in energy management. Of Italian descent, Dina is considering a move back to California to be closer to family.

Gayl was modeling in a figure drawing class when her instructor suggested that she might consider enrolling as a student. After being walked to the admissions area, she enrolled as an unclassified student for two semesters, taking one class each term and studying to attain a GED certificate. High school equivalency credentials in hand, Gayl enrolled full-time and completed her Associate in General Studies degree in four years.

A first generation college student, Gayl hoped that her success would motivate the last of her three children from a previous marriage to aim for a college education as well. Despite her husband's illness, a learning disability, and family obligations, Gayl is currently enrolled at a large public university where she is pursuing a degree in education.

The final graduate of GTC who agreed to be interviewed is MG, a Hispanic woman who looks much younger than her 40 years. She had enrolled at a university directly out of high school, but found it to be a poor fit and dropped out. She then married and was an "at home mom" until her son was in the eighth grade.

An artist at heart, MG continues photographing the GTC theatre productions two years after her graduation. While enrolled at GTC she was involved with the Phi Theta Kappa honors society, was selected to receive the prestigious President's Award, and was valedictorian of her class. MG is currently studying photography and education at a large

public university, where her husband is employed as a secretary.

Majestic View Community College (MVCC)

Majestic View Community College is housed on 117 acres just a few miles outside of a rural town whose main industries include factory work and agriculture. One other college--a private, four year institution--is located in the immediate area. Majestic View serves slightly more than 3,500 students, with approximately one-third of the group studying full-time. The college population is 87% White and 11% African American, with Hispanic, Asian and American Indian cultures representing only 2% of the student body. The majority of the students are female (63%), and approximately 50% are twenty-five years of age or older. While a percentage of MVCC's graduates pursue baccalaureate degrees after graduation, 60% enter the job market within two years of graduation. The employment opportunities in the area are reported as "fair."

Six graduates of MVCC were interviewed for this research. The first, Bonnie, is a white, 48 year old, divorced mother of two. A first generation college student, she had attended a two year college in the 1970s, but did not complete the program due to family and work conflicts. She then enrolled in MVCC in the 1980s, but "burned out" after two years and went to work at various jobs requiring unskilled labor. Enrolling in the Options/Opportunities Program for Public Aid recipients, Bonnie was offered a part-time work-study job with the office and completed her degree while working part-time and studying part-time. Bonnie's degree in Office Technology was completed in two years, and she is currently employed full-time in a temporary position. While enrolled at MVCC, Bonnie was nominated for and received a "Women's Work Achievement Award" sponsored

by the Options/Opportunities Program.

Like her mother, Caitlynn had planned to complete business college immediately after high school, but the lure of summer and beaches proved too strong and she dropped out after one week. She worked at various retail and labor jobs prior to having her son and accepting public assistance and moving into public housing. Public Assistance programs helped Caitlynn complete Records Management and Certified Nursing Assistant certificates prior to enrolling full-time in the Office Technology A.A.S. degree program to qualify for a career. While studying at MVCC, Caitlynn held a student work study job in the Registrar's office, and has been a Lab Service Coordinator for a medical firm since her graduation. She now has a second child and is living with a significant other who will graduate from a trade school in May.

Hanging out with the wrong crowd, drinking heavily and involved in an abusive relationship, Datoria had three young children and no high school diploma by the age of 21. Her older sister's success in completing a GED and attending college was a powerful model for Datoria, who feared her lifestyle might lead to the loss of her children. MVCC was a strange environment for Datoria, who lived in African-American neighborhoods and had not had many interactions with people of other cultures or races. With faith and God's help she persevered and has recently entered a four year program to complete her baccalaureate degree in business or accounting.

A 48-year old divorced white woman, Linda had worked in offices off and on while raising her six children and caring for her aging parents. When her youngest children were almost ready to enter school she decided to re-enter the workforce and realized that

computerization had greatly changed job requirements and she did not have the experience to be hired for even minimum wage labor jobs. The first person in her family to graduate from college, she completed an Associate in Applied Science degree in office technology and utilized temporary employment programs as a means of entry to a good job.

Robin joined the military after college and was trained as a carpentry/masonry specialist, a field somewhat connected to her interest in being an architect. After divorcing her husband, leaving her 13 month old child on an unaccompanied tour of duty in Germany was unattractive, so Robin decided to end her military service and find work elsewhere. Although the child support she received kept her out of the welfare system, she could not work enough hours at the local discount store to move above the poverty level. The three week displaced homemakers program at MVCC convinced her that a degree was important, and she worked with a family assistance program to secure public housing and food stamps while she enrolled in the Industrial Drafting program leading to an A.A.S. degree. It wasn't easy. A white re-entry student, she accepted a college work study job cleaning campus bathrooms and public areas between classes. Her daughter took public transportation after her second grade classes each day and stayed in the college day care center until her mother could go home. It took her five years to complete the degree. At 37, Robin is working full-time in her career area and is no longer considered poverty level.

Last, Shirlene, a forty-seven year old white woman, completed an A.A.S. in Computer Science at MVCC despite handicapping asthma and thyroid conditions. With one son, she had worked off and on to support her family when her husband was laid off from his job with a local manufacturer. Concerned about economic security as she approached her

forties, Shirlene realized the need for the academic credentials to secure a position that would take advantage of--and pay for--the advanced computer skills she had learned on-the-job. Bright, outspoken, creative and opinionated, Shirlene's natural leadership abilities and Type-A personality served her well when she returned to college. She graduated with only one B, having complemented courses in her program with advanced placement course work.

Williams Bay County College (WBCC)

Williams Bay County College is located 35 miles from a major urban center and serves the more than half million citizens who work or reside within the nearly 500 miles that span WBCC's district. The college serves over 14,000 students each year, with 80% of this group studying part-time. In the last decade the college undertook an initiative to enhance the diversity of its employees as retirements or job opportunities elsewhere create openings. Employee ranks closely parallel the student demographics, with 8% African American, 13% Hispanic, 67% White, 5% Asian Pacific Islander and 7% Other. Williams Bay County is a stable area, with extremely low unemployment, little transient housing, and several corporate headquarters within its boundaries. Four private colleges have campuses in Williams Bay County, and many residents commute to the city for jobs.

As was the case with GTC and MVCC, six graduates of WBCC were interviewed for this study. A brief portrait of each follows.

At 48 and with both children out of high school, Ad Lena looked to her next life phase. An African-American woman, she had advanced through the ranks of the police department by completing continuing education course work supported by the department

and accepting new assignments. However, she did not have the academic credentials needed to fulfill her goal to teach at the local college. With the aid of a counselor, Ad Lena developed a schedule of courses and a time line for completion of her education--first the associate's, then a bachelor's, and, finally, a master's degree in Criminal Justice. Lack of confidence, expectations of perfection, and lack of transportation created stress during her four years at WBCC; however, with a mentor she completed the program and recently finished her baccalaureate degree. A newlywed, Ad Lena plans to take a short break before starting the master's program.

Annie's quick wit and enthusiastic style belied her 77 years. A white woman who was twice divorced and the mother of four boys, Annie waited until she retired from her secretarial work at a high school district before she pursued her dream of college. When her youngest sister died she faced her own mortality and took the plunge into higher education. She completed an Associate in Arts in Liberal Studies slowly, by taking two classes each semester for seven years. Annie reveled in the opportunity to learn, the energy of her classmates and the warmth of her faculty. She would like to continue her studies; however, she has recently moved to a less expensive area and is still in the process of settling into her new home.

Married with two sons, Lee, 43, took an early-out from her military career after 17 years. Although she had studied at different colleges while stationed at various posts, her early status as a single parent and lack of direction led to a smattering of courses without a degree. Examining her options, Lee decided she needed a degree to capture the type of job that would pay her what she wanted to earn and entered WBCC intending to study data

processing. With the exception of one telecourse, Lee found the community college a positive experience and has since completed a bachelor's degree and secured a position with a major firm.

A white woman from a rural background, Letha completed her GED in 1979, just before the last of her six children graduated from high school. She began taking classes in 1985 and graduated eleven years later from WBCC with an Associate in Applied Science degree in Business. A great grandmother at 57, Letha is married for the second time and has been employed by the government for 16 years in a variety of clerical level positions. Civil service downsizing and a desire to get ahead prompted her to enroll at the college, although neither of her parents graduated from grade school. Slowly she figured out the educational system, became a role model for her children and co-workers, and completed her degree.

Although a first generation college student, Mary C.'s husband has done well and she enjoys a white, upper middle class existence. At 49, she was pleased that her Associate in Arts Degree in Social Sciences and Arts was completed fourteen years after enrolling for the first semester at WBCC, and would like to complete her work toward teaching certification. Mary C. has two sons and currently works as a teacher's aide in a local parochial school. She volunteers frequently at her son's schools and enjoys creating her own art pieces.

The final WBCC graduate, Renee, is a single mother who hoped to provide more for her two children than the life her cafeteria worker job afforded. From a large and supportive African American family, Renee worked full-time while studying part-time, and used early academic experiences to motivate her toward success. Quiet, directed and ambitious, twenty-eight year old Renee has gone on to complete a baccalaureate degree and is currently

employed in accounting while considering a master's program.

Whether at GTC, MVCC, or WBCC, every one of the eighteen women graduates interviewed in this study recalled her community college experience favorably, even when the road to obtaining the degree had been long and arduous. All spoke of entering college as nervous, intimidated women who quickly gained confidence in their abilities and potential and moved at a comfortable pace through their course work to graduation. Many of the women graduated with high grade point averages and many more than the sixty credit hours required for alumnus status. As Shirlene put it: "When I exited school here, I was offended because they only gave me an A.A.S. and not a bachelor's degree. I had 110 hours!"

In an effort to understand the varied experiences of these women and the successful outcomes that they produced, it is important to discover the processes that led participants to enroll at the community college. This topic is addressed in the next section.

### The Back Story: Aspirations and Motivations for Returning to School

In literature, the events that characters encounter before the opening of a story are called the "back story." These experiences often hold the key to character motivation and their future course of action. Upon examination, this seems true of the eighteen women who form the basis of this study.

Three patterns of prior experience illuminate the educational paths of the re-entry women interviewed. The first group of women did not even consider college after high school, since it was not a typical route for women in their families or circumstances. A second group of women would probably have pursued college, but did not because economics or negative experiences limited their opportunities to select this option after high

school. The final group of women did enroll in a higher education program immediately following high school; however, competing interests led them to drop out prior to completing a degree program. Each of these groups is examined in turn.

Act I: Aspirations

No Time, No Money, No Desire, No College. Six of the women interviewed never considered college as a next step after high school. Two of them did not even complete high school. They moved into roles as employees, wives or mothers as the natural consequence of coming of age. Diana spoke eloquently for several members of this group when she recalled her life at that point:

> I graduated from high school and went to work. Money was a problem, definitely, because there were still smaller children after me. I graduated from high school at 16. College was not important to my family; it was more like high school was important. But college--because they had never gone, they felt it was something that was out of their reach. We never discussed it. High school and job were important.

For Datoria, Linda, and Letha, children and family became the focus of their young adulthood. Education was not a priority for this group--food, clothing and shelter took precedence. Letha attended high school during the 1960s, and found school to be a most aversive setting. As she related:

> I hated school! I was never happy in school. I think it was because my parents were very poor, and we were on public aid. I was so embarrassed. And I had to work in the lunch room for my lunches. We never had any

> money. I had maybe two skirts and two blouses to go to school in. I think the kids made fun of me a lot. I was just embarrassed.

It makes sense that Letha did not find school a place to retreat from her problems and develop her dreams when there was shame associated with the experience. The depth of that discomfort with education was shared with at least one sibling--maybe. Letha continued:

> No one else in the family, except my younger brother who's passed away, has even thought about going to college. Like I said, I'm from a small town. . . but my brother did, I know he did. He never said anything, he never told anybody he was doing it; but I'm sure he did, because he worked for the telephone company in the computer center. So he had to go to school; he had to. But he never said anything to anyone about it.

Letha never said anything to anyone about her high school distress, either. Instead, she got pregnant and dropped out:

> Once you got to high school, I think, when you think back to what you really did, you try not to believe that's what happened. But I think I got pregnant on purpose just so I didn't have to go to school. I didn't ever want to think that. And it didn't get me very far--three kids and back in school!

Just as some families establish further education as an expectation after high school, others groom their children to prepare for jobs and/or marriage and children. A college education is a foreign endeavor, and entry level jobs in factories or offices offer lucrative benefits and salaries for the high school graduate or young adult wanting to gain independence. Without considering other options or even fully knowing what motivated their

actions, these women followed familiar patterns modeled by others in their families. Time and experience, however, showed these women the benefits of breaking out of the familiar patterns they learned at home.

College: A Dream Derailed. A second group of six women considered and even wanted to go to college, but did not pursue this option because competing responsibilities or negative messages limited the likelihood of college as a post-high school option.

Robin and Lee, for instance, entered the military after high school and thought that this career option would provide the stability they needed in their lives. Lee recounted:

> I had a baby when I was young, and I couldn't do it [college] then. I was a single mother for a while and I had to support the family, then I went into the military because I found it offered a steady paycheck. You don't need a lot of education and it's a steady paycheck.

Robin entered the military to pursue a career. She recalled:

> I knew I wanted to be an architect, but that was when I was ten. I didn't [pursue it]. College was involved--and it just never quit. I was a carpenter/masonry specialist in the military. Not that it helps because you're a female so you're confined to non-engineering. I couldn't go to the engineering company to learn to build bridges and stuff because I was female. I went to Basic, Advanced Intelligence Training, like the guys, learning this and that and different things. But when I left, the guys I went to school with got to go to an engineering company. I got to go to a medical group. We worked on lights and ran the generators. Little stuff.

Although the military provided these women with the means to an end, it did not accomplish their true goals. Lee tried to utilize her military benefits to pursue an education, but found it difficult to juggle the responsibilities of being a mother, wife, enlisted woman, and coed. She related:

> I would have stuck with it [college], except I got married again, had another baby, and even though I took these classes every once in a while, it was *really hard* to try to focus and achieve what I wanted to achieve. To me, it was spreading myself too thin. I would take a class--business, math, or something--as I was in the military with the baby; and I would be so thankful when the class was over, because it would just sap all of my time.

Other women abdicated their dreams of college because family realities intervened. Economic conditions, family obligations, undiagnosed learning problems, or discouraging teachers were roadblocks that these women were not able to surmount. Although they had larger dreams than their parents, they did not have enough support or interest in their dreams to consider college a viable option upon graduating from--or dropping out of--high school. When asked about her college matriculation at the age of 70, Annie remarked:

> It's something I had wanted to do when I graduated from high school, but then my dad had just started working full-time after many years of having just part-time work during the Depression years, and it [college] just wasn't a possibility. And so, it was something that I held dear to me, but life got kind of complicated and I just shoved it aside.
>
> For many people it's hard to understand why I've gone back to

school. I mean, I still want to go back, but it didn't come early when I really wanted it, and so I really want it now in a special way. And I love it in a different way. I have more experience behind me--or different experience--and I get so much more out of it. I mean, I'm not going to turn it into a job--that can't be--who'd want to hire me?? (laughter)

Mary C.'s life also got complicated at an early age. As she recounted:

I didn't get married until I was 26, and in those years from high school until I was 26, I had wanted to go to college and couldn't. I didn't have support from my family, and my mother got pregnant in her old age, so I sort of stayed home, and then I left home when I was 17. But I kind of helped my mom out. It was a strange situation. I was working two/three jobs just to make ends meet. There was no room for school, but I always knew I wanted to go back.

Pragmatic realities kept Annie and Mary C. out of college halls at more traditional ages. Once those realities were a thing of the past, they embraced their dreams. By that time, Annie was retired and Mary C.'s family enjoyed an income which did not require her to work outside the home. The paths these women chose were clearly influenced by financial conditions and other expectations that providing for their families should be their main priority. For the most part, they enjoyed the educational process and were successful in that arena; however, after high school they were expected to be productive income producers, and they complied with this familial expectation. Two other women who might have attended college also selected alternate paths due to expectations and conditions.

Gayl's problems began in high school when she could no longer compensate for her learning disability without assistance. Unfortunately, in the 1970s there was little information and few resources for special needs students. She noted:

> I dropped out the first time when I was in high school in my senior year in 1974. There were no special education programs in place. I was figuring out that something was wrong. I realized that part of it was an attention deficit problem. What I wound up doing was dropping out because there were no services. There was no one to go to. And I had a teacher scream at me "God, girl, are you stupid!" in front of an entire class. At that point I dropped out.
>
> About a year and a half later I decided to go back [to high school], but I was living in a different neighborhood so I went to a different school and I was doing really well in the humanities but in the other courses I was still having a very difficult time. So, I asked to be tested. It was when they diagnosed at that point an "unspecific" learning disability. Again, this was 1976, so we still didn't have a really good understanding of learning disabilities. And, I had five teachers, four of whom said, "Well, you'll never be able to keep up with the class, you'll never be able to recall information under pressure. We'll all understand if you drop out."

Further testing indicated that Gayl had developed strong skills to compensate for her learning disabilities; however, experts did not believe she could unlearn these skills or replace them with more adaptive behaviors. It devastated her. She reported, "I wound up with low self-esteem. Frankly, I wound up with a drug and alcohol problem because of the

low self-esteem and the feeling of helplessness. I'd wanted to teach from the time I was five years old. And it seemed like something that was totally unrealistic."

Shirlene also had plans to attend college after high school, but her plans "got derailed by the death of my counselor when I was in high school":

> I really had no clue what I needed to do to get there [college]. And my newest counselor, late in my junior years, she told me--and I didn't have enough self confidence in myself back at that time to buck her on this--she told me that I
>
> probably wouldn't get to college because I didn't know what I was doing. It was just a real put down. And it was easy to put me down back then because, as I said, I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself. I didn't really develop the confidence in myself that I felt I needed until probably three years after I graduated. I graduated in '69, then I went through a series of low-end, couldn't-get-anything-else, so-I'll-settle-for-what-I-got jobs. Telephone solicitation. You know those kind of things. I really hated it. The first real job I had was in 1972 and I went to work [for a bank] as a proof operator. I did that for a very short period of time; they were short-handed in the computer room, and finally they transferred me and I became a computer operator.

Shortly afterward, she married her best friend, Mike, had a baby and stayed home to care for her family.

These six women had hoped to continue their education but were discouraged by economics, attitudes and the realities of the eras and societies in which they came of age.

They were determined women, however, and their dreams were more derailed than forever denied.

College Bound: But the Real World Beckons. Immediately after high school, the final group of six women enrolled in a variety of higher education institutions, including private or public universities, proprietary schools, or community colleges. They did not, however complete their intended programs of study.

Although both Dina and Ad Lena enrolled in college after graduating from high school, their interests seldom focused on classroom matters. For instance, Dina confessed: "I was more interested in men at the time. I just couldn't concentrate on my studies. I was more of a working gal, and I got a job right away. I liked the freedom of having my own place." Both Dina and Ad Lena dropped out of college, accepted jobs in male dominated fields, and steadily advanced to responsible positions within their organizations.

MG had attended a college-preparatory school, and enrolled at an urban university immediately afterwards. She shared:

> I had originally attended college after high school, and it was important, but it was what my parents wanted for me. You just went to college as the next step. I had no idea what I wanted to do right after high school, so I just got real tired. I stayed [at the university] for two and a half years, and then I just dropped.

MG reflected further upon the vocational interests that she might have nurtured if they had been taken seriously by the authority figures in her life. She reminisced:

The things I was really interested in doing when I was younger was like

> carpentry. And those doors were closed to me. Girls didn't do that. That's partly my father, but it's also like I had an uncle who's a contractor and my mom had asked if I could do a summer with him as an apprenticeship, and he just laughed it off as the biggest joke in the world. That kind of stuff. And being quiet and shy to begin with just makes it all that much harder.

Aja attended a prestigious local university right out of high school, intending to be a doctor. "And I got pregnant and had my son, not to mention I bombed out [academically]. You know, I was 18, doing everything else, and so I got pregnant. And my mother said, 'Go to work.'" So she did.

Caitlynn, likewise, related her story of new-found independence and short term rewards that too quickly ended her college career:

> I went to Business College. Graduated on a Friday--May, whatever, 1985--and I started school on Monday. I only had the weekend to move because I thought, 'I want to get into this! I want to get going! It's summertime, my parents are in [one city], grandparents in [another city] and I'll be in [here]. Thirty minutes either way.'
>
> I lived with an older lady who had converted her Victorian home into a boarding house. I did court reporting, law, all that stuff. And I lasted about a week. A week on the beach was just too inviting; and so I ended up dropping out. I moved in with my grandparents and got a job in the next town, and did that for a while and was happy, but just never did have anything.

After dropping out of college, Caitlynn became certified as a nurse's assistant and worked for a period of time in a home for the elderly. After tiring of that work, she "did retail, manual labor for a while." She continued her story:

> Then I was assistant manager for an oil company/gas station. I found out I was pregnant and, whether they want to deny it or not, was basically fired because I was pregnant. So I thought, "Well, here I am now, what'll I do? No one's gonna hire me pregnant." So I went on Public Aid and found federally funded Section 8 Housing, got this apartment and decided, "Well, I've been working two jobs most of my life; I'll kind of draw what I paid in for a while and then I'll find another job." And then I got lazy. Got used to sitting home. Didn't have to work, but still got a little bit. Enough money to survive--if you want to call it that--but it was enough.

Renee was in the accelerated program at her high school. Her first child was born during her senior year, and her second child a year later. A single parent of two pre-schoolers, she started at the community college, but "then kind of stopped going" and worked in the cafeteria at the local military installation.

Dina, Ad Lena, MG, Aja, Caitlynn and Renee all had the opportunity, the interest, and the ability to attend college at a traditional life stage. However, they also had competing interests which could not be served in a college classroom--men, money and motherhood. As much as the first group of women did not think about college, this third group of women moved toward college as a logical "next step." However, their failure to fully consider other options was as much a disservice as the failure of the women who did not consider college

as an option. Both cases, ultimately, led back to the college path.

Act II: Motivations for Going to College as a Re-entry Woman

Although the women in this study offered various reasons why they did not complete college degrees when they were of traditional college-bound age, eventually they all enrolled at a community college and attained a degree. Such a decision was not easily reached, as it often meant assuming additional responsibilities and work, challenging long-held self-perceptions and developed social roles, and risking the possibility of failure. What, then, motivated these women to enroll at a community college? Was it a planned activity or one of life's meandering side roads? What made college enrollment worth the potential costs to these women? What triggered the return at any given point? The answers to these questions fell into four overlapping categories: dream fulfillment/self-fulfillment, economics, children, and opportunity. It would be convenient if one clear trigger could be identified for each woman as she undertook collegiate study; however, as Annie said, "life got kind of complicated," and often it was a combination of factors which spurred action.

The Dream of Self-Fulfillment. As noted earlier, several women--like Annie and Mary C.-- had little support for their dreams of college when they graduated from high school. Economic conditions and family expectations took precedence over their own intellectual or career development. As their lives took various twists, the dreams remained in their hearts, awaiting fulfillment. For Annie, the turning point came while using her training as a hospice volunteer to ease her younger sister as she died. "Age had never bothered me--and I was 69 then. But with the coming of my 70th birthday, I was beginning to feel afraid." When a friend asked what she feared, Annie replied, "I'm afraid I won't be

able to realize my dreams. I want to go to school." Four days later she had signed up for two courses at Williams Bay County College.

Mary C.'s desire for formal learning resurrected after quitting her job in real estate to be a "stay-at-home mom." Mary C. reported, "I felt like I was out of it. And I think I decided to go back to school because I felt that I needed something more than just being at home. TV wasn't doing it for me. I had to have some kind of challenge."

When she decided to quit her non-traditional job as a pipeline scheduler to return to school, Dina expressed similar sentiments:

> I had a good life with a man I still love, and everything was fine, but I had a real hunger to do something different. And I found myself looking around at the men I was working with and, because I didn't have children--I wasn't obligated to a child or by taking care of them, and they [the men] all hated their jobs, and they were very seduced by the money--which is really good--and they were all incredibly in debt, and I found myself starting to go that way. And I thought, "I don't want to go to work every day and do my job without believing in what I'm doing."

After taking a few courses at the local community college, Dina decided to make a solid commitment to embrace education, quit her job in California and relocated to the Midwest to start fresh.

Ad Lena's longings for change expressed themselves differently, but just as strongly. She reported:

> It was a matter of a long-term goal to teach at a community college. I had

> also promised myself that, when my son was 21, I would go back to school. And that's what I did. I didn't really decide it [to teach], it was just. . . I don't know how to explain it except I just believe that it's what God wants me to do. I had other plans, and one day I woke up and I just had this burning desire to do it. That's the only explanation I have. It's not something I contemplated for a long time. It certainly made sense, so I said, "Why not?"
>
> I started school in the summer of '92--he was 21 in October '91. That was the time to do it. That was the time line.

Ad Lena worked full-time for the sheriff's department while pursuing her dream.

Elese had a taste of higher education when she went to a school for fashion merchandising at the age of 36, "and I had been out of school 2000 years then!" Working for a temporary agency, in one year Elese completed the certificate program, "But then I got a part-time job at this store, and I met [her daughter's] father. He drove a Pace Bus. And the next year [my daughter] was born." After staying at home with her daughter for a year, she began working at a large department store in her area, but found limited career options for a Black woman in the 1970s. Eventually she went back to temporary office work, which paid better but did not include benefits.

In 1992, Elese found her life in an upheaval. Now a single mother, Elese was at one hospital while her daughter had her tonsils removed, and, in another hospital, her best girlfriend died of breast cancer. Later that year she endured six weeks of radiation to stem cancerous growths found in her own breasts. Elese commented, "I've always wanted to go back to school. I knew I would do that, but in '92 it was a crossroads in my life. On my road

back to mental health and getting myself together, I decided, 'Yes!' I know I needed something." And for Elese, enrolling at Grant Technical College was just the thing.

A final "dreamer," Aja, provided a good example of the overlapping motives of dreams and self-improvement, economics, and opportunity. As noted earlier, Aja had planned to be a doctor until her first college experience was interrupted by the arrival of her son. She recalled:

> I started working full-time at a college-preparatory high school. Being there, all the people had degrees; everybody had degrees, and I was just the little receptionist. I started to feel bad. I don't know if they, personally, looked down on me, but I felt like they did. So I started going to school. I had wanted to be a doctor, so I was originally going with that thought. I didn't ask anybody, but I figured I'd need psychology, and I'd need certain courses, so I just started taking them. Work had tuition reimbursement, and it kind of had to be something that related to work. So, like, psychology related to work.

When probed further, Aja added a financial motive:

> I guess I wanted my degree because I wanted to be able to do better. I was making $10,000 a year, so I needed more money. And I knew a degree would get me some more money. Basically, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I still thought I wanted to be a doctor, but I was working and everything, so I kind of thought, "at least let me just start now and see where I'm going."

Aja wandered through GTC for twelve years before she completed her Associate's degree.

As is often the case, people with vague rather than defined goals--like Aja, Annie, and Mary C.--travel a more circuitous route to their destinations. A single mother, a senior citizen, and a parent, their lengthy tenure as students appears more indicative of time and energy conflicts than lack of motivation. Mary C. spoke about her decision to get a degree:

> I had taken some other course that was just interesting, and then said, "Well, you know, this is kind of fun. If I want to actually get a degree--which I ought to do since I'm going back to school--why waste this time? You know, even when I bowl I don't like to throw practice balls and get a strike. You know what I mean, because I'll never get that strike during the game. I don't want to waste it. I don't like to practice a thing. And since I wasn't working anymore, I took advantage of it; and that's one of the reasons I strung it out so long. I didn't want to burden the family doing it all--either financially or with time. But the wanting to go back was just a deep kind of a desire to keep on going.

Money, Money, Money. Just as Mary C. did not want to financially burden her family and Aja relied upon tuition reimbursement to finance her education, economics played an important motivating role in the decisions of other women in this study. Two tracks provided the foundation for this theme: a desire for education as an instrument to re-enter the workforce, change careers, or enhance their value in the labor market, and a desire for education to offset a lifestyle that was dependent upon public assistance.

The roadblocks encountered by Linda after a brief absence from the workplace to

care for young children and aging parents illustrate the need to re-tool to compete in an increasingly technological workplace. As she reported:

> I've worked ever since I graduated from high school. The only time I wasn't working was when I had to take off for maternity leave. Then my parents took ill, so I took care of them. My mother passed away, and my father was well enough he could stay there and I was ready to go back to work. That's when I found out that everything had changed--it was all computers.

Linda continued:

> I knew how to type, and I had done keypunch on the cards and keyed on tape. I had done all of that, so it was not anything that I didn't know. And I knew how to do a little bookkeeping, and this or that; but everything was computers, and I thought, "Ok, it's time to go back to school."

Others women were employed, but looking to improve job security or move into a more lucrative career path. Lee and Letha were both working for the federal government when they decided to enroll in a college program. Letha recalled:

> I think it's just that one day a couple of us girls were sitting around at lunchtime, and we're looking at . . . somebody sent a brochure from a local college. And we were looking at it, and we both decided we should go back to school. Here we are, sitting here making maybe $10.00 an hour at that time. We said, "Maybe if we go back to school we can make more money." So that's what I decided to do. I don't know if she ever did or not.

When Lee realized she was able to take early retirement after 17 years with the

military, it seemed like a good plan. She remembered:

> I had talked to my husband, and one of the things we were talking about as I was coming out was, what was I going to do after I was out?! I said to him, "I've always wanted to go back to school and get my degree; and I'm looking at data processing." We talked about it and decided that we could afford to do this, so I got out in July, though I didn't really start school until January. I think I wanted some time off. I did kind of look for a job for a while, but I found out right away that, even with all of that military time, without a degree I was not going to be making any money. I wasn't getting the interviews I wanted to get. So, that was another factor in determining that I was going to go to school in January, and I was going to go full-time. Financially we could afford it, the government came in and picked up the cost of the schooling plus they paid me money to go to school, so I was getting all of that taken care of and it worked out.

In Lee's case, the fact that she was one member of a two-paycheck household was an important factor in her decision. The opportunity for her to realize a dream of education without loss of income and, potentially, with anticipated additional earnings, fortified her resolve.

When her son was in the eighth grade, MG decided to return to school for a degree. She reported:

> I went back to school because I wanted a degree. And a lot of it was I didn't want a $5.00 per hour job. I didn't want to have to be stuck in a job I didn't

like, and I didn't like doing something I didn't like just to put bread on the table or pay rent or something. I also knew I'd have to provide for myself--I could not count on someone else (husband) to get what I wanted.

My husband wanted me to go back to work. He wanted another income, and I understand that. Even though I had been cleaning houses, that money ended up going toward necessities that just kind of floated away. I probably wouldn't have to work at this point if I didn't want to, but it gives me an independence that I wouldn't have otherwise, and I need that for myself.

For MG, being able to ensure her own economic security was an important and pragmatic dream.

At 57 years of age, Diana found herself out of work after 36 years with one company. She reflected:

[The company] they moved to Oregon. So there I was, back into the workforce, but I had noticed some trends as I was working--more and more people being hired with degrees. So I knew it was going to be hard for me to find a new position making the same salary without a degree. I had been doing collection work, but I started at the bottom and just kind of worked my way up. My salary was at the same time being moved up.

So I thought this was a good time to go back to school. But I didn't go in with the thought that I was gonna stay for a degree. They had a certificate program that I thought I could utilize, and get in and out within a

year and go back to work.

Shirlene also articulated the economic drive that headed her back to school. She had worked part-time and temporary work over the years, providing the family's income when her husband was laid off from his manufacturing job. When her son entered high school she decided to start looking for something more permanent. She reported her disappointment with her job search:

> Because it didn't matter--it didn't seem to matter that I was ready to go ahead and get into the full-time work force, and it didn't seem to matter to the employer that I had such a wide variety of computer skills and experience. I was pushing 40, I'm permanently disabled, I'm a woman, and it was very difficult to get anybody to take me seriously. Even the temporary jobs that I had, the 'men' that I worked for in these temporary jobs, said that I was the most amazing employee they'd ever had because I could do so much. I worked so well, they could just point me in the direction of the job and I organized it. I built data bases for the city. I built spreadsheets--automated spreadsheets--for a wire company. I did all kinds of stuff like that, but nobody would hire me because I didn't have a piece of paper that said I could do the job.
>
> [My son] was, I think, a sophomore in high school before I began to find the futility of finding something that paid more than minimum wage. And that's when I went back to school. I thought, ok, if I can't beat the game no matter how good I am or how much they like me, I'll get the paper in my

hand. So that's what I did.

When pushed to articulate the importance of going back to work at that time, Shirlene shared:

> We had financially struggled for all of those years, but we felt the struggle was necessary because we also felt like a parent should always be there for him [son]. I'm not a "keep up with the Jones's" person and so I didn't feel like I had to have the fanciest car on the block or the fanciest house. When [son] went to high school and became more self-sufficient--he had his own job--we were able to afford a nicer car. A car that didn't require regular towing-in kind of maintenance (laughter). So, actually, we knew eventually our jobs as needing-to-be-there-parents was likely to be lessened, and we would be ready to have the income better. We do want to upgrade to a nicer home. We also needed to plan for retirement. My husband's company didn't have retirement until the year before I started college. And with him being laid off so much, even if we'd have had money in savings, it would have been long gone. So, we needed to plan for retirement, and the only way to do that was for me to go back and get a job.

These re-entry women were motivated by dreams, hopes, and the almighty dollar to enroll in college and earn a degree. They were not strangers to the workforce, but--for one reason or another--they did not have the skills, the breadth of experience, or the credentials to permit job advancement, guarantee security, or secure a job suited to their abilities and potential. For them, work was a means of survival and independence--to pay bills,

supplement the household income, or compensate for shifts of fortune. They did not strategically participate in the workforce, changing jobs to advance in their field, building a network to ease in job transfers, or amassing the references or reputation which would allow them to be considered without the degree. When they realized this deficiency, they embraced the community college option as a tool for change.

Finances also motivated a second group of women, who grew weary of their dependence upon meager public assistance for food, housing and medical care. They realized, ultimately, that their lifestyles would not improve if they did not take action. They were determined to improve their financial situations.

A notice from Public Aid spurred Caitlynn to act. She reported:

> I wanted a career. I didn't want a job anymore. I didn't want to be on Public Aid. I didn't want to sit at home. So I just decided I would go back. I was exempt from Public Aid because of Alexander's age. I did not have to go back until he was three; or find a job or anything. And something just hit me--I don't know what it was--when he was thirteen months old they sent me a letter, and I called them and said, "My child's only thirteen months old." And before I could even spit it out, they were like, "Well, you're exempt from the program. Don't worry about it. We'll send you a letter that you can take to your next recertification for food stamps and the grant."
>
> And I was like, "Well, wait a minute. I don't want to be exempt. I'm calling you to let you know that even though he's not three, I want to go through the program." And that's when I went out--non-credit, Options and

> Opportunities, and got the medical records certificate. And from there, I was neck and neck with the highest grade point average, and earned a job with the Registrar, in his office. Of course, I had to interview. And he hired me right then and there. I started working for him. And it was a federal work-study job, so I still received my Public Aid and my assistance for housing, but I still got paid for my job. So it was to where it just kind of gave you a little boost and made you feel like you were getting somewhere. So I worked for him for all the time I was in school--two and a half years.

Welfare-to-work legislation has forced individuals into the workforce to ensure the continued receipt of benefits like medical coverage and food stamps. Ultimately, public aid recipients had a limited time in which to train for employment before their benefits were eliminated--likely forcing them into a minimum wage position. Bonnie had been doing community service to qualify for medical coverage when she realized a desire for more. She reported:

> I was unemployed, and I didn't want to spend my life working in a fast-food place. Minimum wage for one. I still have a child at home to raise. I've had a taste of working in a factory and making some money. Then that job ended and I had to find something else. It's been up, down, up, down. That's the reason I went back to get it [the degree].

At 47 years of age, Bonnie realized that she had many more years in the workforce, and that physical labor would be increasingly difficult and less available over time.

One-third of the women in this study utilized Public Aid sources while they worked

toward a degree. For many of them, the combination of financial support and educational opportunity provided by local programs for displaced homemakers was essential to their decisions to return to college and successfully complete programs.

For the Children. When asked why they decided to pursue a community college education, many of the women in this study pointed to their children as motivating factors. They were acutely aware that their children viewed them as role models, and that if they didn't complete high school, if they passively accepted their role as low-level employees in tedious jobs, or if they did not strive for the best life possible, they could not expect their children to develop and pursue higher aspirations. Renee, a single mother with young children, spoke for other participants when she mused:

> I didn't feel that I was--self-sufficient, I guess, is a good word. I needed assistance from government programs and that's not where I wanted to be, or the lifestyle that I wanted to provide for my kids. I just didn't see myself just wallowing in that place. I just was not happy. I can see myself even now working toward the goals that I want. I'm not where I want to be, but I can see where I've been, I can see that I'm progressing--that I'm moving forward. I didn't see that then. I kept looking at what I was teaching my children: that you put yourself in a position and you wallow in that position and you don't try to dig your way out of it. You should have people in life that are willing to help you, but it's nobody else's responsibility to pull you up.

When she re-married in 1992, Gayl's second husband encouraged her to complete her GED and continue her education. He supported and encouraged her while she studied for

the GED, which she passed with honors. The reason she went back to school? Gayle shared:

> I have a son who is special needs. He's 19 now. He was in high school in Special Education himself, and having some serious difficulties with a lot of behavioral and oppositional problems. And I realized that if I didn't have my GED I might not really have a right to tell him to stay in school. So I felt like it was either put up or shut up. It's like you can't do as I say and not do as I do. And then, by me going to school, I hoped that I would be setting a good example for him.

Despite this resolve, Gayl had no plans for further schooling. She was only struggling with high school subjects to be a good role model for her son. In the process, she learned something about herself as well. Gayl shifted her sights:

> When I realized I did well on the GED. Up to that point I'd been thinking I was going to end up blowing the math, and I knew already that I could study again and re-take the math portion. But the idea of going to college just hadn't occurred to me--I just couldn't see myself getting a degree. But when I scored that high on the [GED] test and I thought about it and said, "Well, if I can do that well on the test, then why shouldn't I be able to do that well in school?"

Her husband agreed, and she pursued her dream at Grant Technical College.

A final example is provided by Datoria, the single mother of three young children. Datoria was a high school drop-out and, like Gayl, completed her GED before enrolling at the community college. She had been involved with drugs, alcohol, and an abusive

relationship, and was on a road to nowhere when she decided she needed to break her downward cycle. Datoria observed:

> [I did it for] the kids. The kids, because if you look at the job sector in this day and age and the criteria that you need to get a well paying job, you have to have some educational background. You have to have a college degree in some kind of field or area. And I thought that, in the best interest of my kids, I had to go to and attain college. That is one of the main reasons why I pursued it so much.

Options and Opportunities. Becoming all they dreamed they could be, improving finances, changing lifestyles and children proved to be important motivators for the re-entry women in this study. None of these themes stood alone, however, as children, lifestyles, finances and dreams bolstered each other in moving the women toward higher education. A final motivator seemed to be opportunity. For a variety of reasons, the time was ripe for these women to return to the classroom, and conditions in their lives provided the space, support, and determination to take on college course work.

These opportunities represented life transitions such as retirement, the end of a military tour of duty, or having children reach a more independent age. This final transition depended upon the woman in question and the point at which she gave herself permission to focus on her own needs. For Ad Lena, this was when her youngest child reached the age of 21; for Shirlene, this point came when her son entered high school; MG saw the window when her child began eighth grade. Others, like Linda, Datoria, Robin and Renee chose to enter college while their children were in preschool or grade school. The second group of

people differed from the first in that they were single parents, without careers or another individual to rely upon for income or support. They had to count on themselves to realize their dreams, change their financial and lifestyle options, and make a good life for their children. And they did.

In addition to justifying the return to school in their own minds, opportunities arose in the form of special programs, like the Options and Opportunities program at MVCC or the independence needs program at GTC. These state-supported programs assist adults--often women--in transitions into the workplace or additional training. Linda discovered the program while searching the want ads to find employment; Bonnie was working with her public aid administrator, who was "determined" that:

> I would find work. Eventually I did, because they needed a student worker to fill in in the office during lunch-time and breaks. Another girl before me didn't work out, so he said the position was open and I could do my internship with the Options/Opportunities Program. That lasted thirty days, and by that time I was already registered for fall classes. Thirty days later, they gave me a call and said, "How would you like to be a student worker and go to school, too?" That sounded pretty good to me, some money on the side while doing classes. So, I started working part-time for the program and stayed there three years until I finally got the degree.

Robin also took advantage of a new opportunity through the local Family Investment Project (FIP). She recalled:

> I had a counselor, a liaison officer, and they had this huge batch of resources

> that they can get to you, where for me it would take a lot of knocking on doors or running up against walls. I was able to get into a clinic so I could have a doctor. When I started my job, one of the ladies gave me some clothes to wear. Of course, MVCC helped out, too, but FIP was there. I was kind of at ends for what to do. I'd left my job, because I knew that the car I had at the time wasn't going to make it back and forth. So, I saw the thing about a workshop for displaced homemakers, and I came out to MVCC and took a class--two or three weeks I think it was--and that's when I decided I wanted to go to school.

For Robin, as with so many others, dreams and opportunities combined to help her realize her options and act on them. That doesn't mean it was easy. As Robin shared:

> I made myself say, "Ok, we're going to live at this level of nothingness." We lived in the projects, and I had so many people say, "Oh my gosh, you're living *there*?" Well, you know it's better than a tent. It's better than being homeless. And I said, "Well, you know, for the most part it's just people like me, trying to get ahead." So, to me it was a sense of you have to live somewhere, let's live here. Let's go on. I can remember being on food stamps, and you go to the grocery store and some people look at you with disgust. And my daughter knew that there wasn't money for lots of things. I look back now, and say, "How did she do it?" But you just do what you have to do.
>
> Many women in Robin's place would not have grasped the opportunity when it was

presented. Yet, for Robin and many other determined women in this study, having a long-term vision that allowed them to see past their current discomfort to a brighter future provided a key motivational ingredient.

## The Community College: "Almost Like A Place I Knew"

The decision to enroll in a college program creates further dilemmas for the individual hoping to re-write the next chapter of her life story. Identifying the desired outcome requires that the potential student investigate various programs that would allow development of skills and interests while ensuring stable and rewarding employment opportunities. She must determine the amount of money, effort, upheaval and change she is willing to endure or impose upon her family as a result of her decision. She must look at the resources for success that are available to her in a given college, and the track record of others like her who are operating in that environment. She must, in short, move from decision point to action.

Having made the decision to pursue a college degree, the local community college became the number one postsecondary institution choice for these women. The decision to attend a community college, however, often had little to do with academic programs. Most interviewees mentioned the low cost, the proximity to their homes, work, or childrens' schools, and easy access via public transportation. Mary C. summed things up when she said:

> Well, [I chose WBCC] because the community college was so darn convenient. It was convenient to get there. I liked WBCC. I liked what I was getting there, and so I went for the associate's degree because that's what they offered. I would have gone for a B.A. if they would have offered it in what

I wanted, but they didn't.

Diana explained her thinking when she said:

> Well, GTC's right downtown. I figured I wanted to work downtown, so why not go to school downtown where I could still search for work right from school? That's why I chose GTC--that's one reason. And I have two daughters that work downtown, and we used to lunch together, so that was fun. I could take public transportation to school.

MG's rationale was similar:

> I did end up choosing GTC because it was closest to where my son was going to school. So, that was weird, but it made sense to me at the time. I went back and it gave me a sense that I could take a few classes here and there and see what I wanted to do.

Like MG, one third of the participants decided to enter a community college as an inexpensive "testing ground." They wanted to see what they'd get out of the college experience--and how they would do--before making a commitment to a more expensive educational system.

When questioned about her decision to attend MVCC instead of a local private college, Datoria said:

> Well, I wanted to get a taste of a college environment--what it was about--before I just stuck my head in the door and went full-blast and then [found] I couldn't really [do it]. So, that's why, that's one of my reasons.
>
> I heard about MVCC through my sister. At that time, when I did hear

> about MVCC, I didn't have my GED. I dropped out of high school, started drinking, hanging around with the wrong people. And, I seen [sic] my sister turn her life around. She went and got her GED. She went to college. And I thought, "Hey, if you can do all this, something must be nice in there, and I can do it!"

Like Datoria, one-third of the participants turned to the community college because of prior experiences with the institution or positive impressions from a friend or family member. Perhaps it was the approachable image of the community college that also drew these re-entry women. Aja noted that she selected GTC "probably because of where it was." She continued, "Another community college is right up there, too, but I think I knew a little bit about GTC because my girlfriend went there and I knew a little bit more. And it was right downtown, so I knew it was safe." Ad Lena's selection combined location and reputation as well. She chose WBCC because "I didn't see any reason not to. It was a community college and WBCC had a tremendous reputation for being top notch. Of course, it's local; it just made sense."

Caitlynn noted the location and convenience of MVCC, and also noted that it was cheaper than the local private college. While she was the only woman who eliminated the private college because "I never figured I could get in," all interviewees said they chose community college over a private college or public university for pragmatic reasons. Interestingly, Caitlynn continued:

> The convenience and the cost kind of got overridden by everybody out there--real friendly and helpful. Big enough that you don't feel crammed together;

> small enough, I wasn't to where I got lost--I knew where I was going. You know, just perfect size and warm and cozy. That's why I picked MVCC.

Shirlene shared Caitlynn's perceptions about MVCC. She reported:

> When I made the decision to become a student it was either here [MVCC] or go to a four-year university. I couldn't afford [the local private college], there just was no doubt about that. And I couldn't afford the commuting if I had gone to the nearest four-year college out of town. So, this was the most likely--.and the only option, I guess-- that I really had. So, I started here and I was really glad, it was so much friendlier. You know, just the atmosphere--rather than a cold kind of aura when you come in, it's just very welcoming and has some nice features. I don't even know if they're paper plants--and it doesn't matter, because it lends to the ambiance.

The ease of entry and welcoming assistance was important to these women who had encountered varying degrees of success with education. At the entry point, especially, the women needed all of the support they could get. Elese and Gayl had planned to attend other community colleges in their urban area, but literally gave up the effort when they couldn't get the information they needed. Elese, a woman who walked eight blocks to her radiation treatments and back, didn't have the same patience when working with colleges. She reported:

> Well, you know, I was going to go to [community college name], but I was looking for classes for social work, and, that particular day, the person I had to see wasn't there at [the college] and they sent me around some. And I said,

"Oh, that's all right. I'll go on to GTC (laughter)." Because that's right there.

Annie spoke for others when she rejected four-year colleges because: "I didn't really think I could afford any of those colleges," and further observed about her community college, WBCC, "it just seemed like the place to go. . .almost like a place I knew."

The women who participated in this study came from diverse economic, cultural, and social backgrounds. They were born into families that held different perspectives on life goals, employment options, and family responsibilities. They would not have likely met each other at a baseball game or an opera performance, but they do have a common thread which weaves their lives together--moving down one path or another, they found their way into a community college program and completed a degree. The next chapter examines the experiences these women shared as re-entry students in community colleges, and how they made sense of the formal and informal learning that occurred.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE: "IT'S BEEN UP, DOWN, UP, DOWN"

This study seeks to understand the community college experiences of eighteen re-entry women. Understanding how they describe, evaluate, and find meaning in their community college experience provides keen insights into the value that they ascribe to their associate's degree and its relative costs and benefits. In addition, these insights provide direction for faculty and staff in various higher education sectors who are attempting to assist this growing, challenging, and determined segment of college bound students.

This chapter focuses on the stories the participants shared about their community college experiences, including how their own histories influenced their behavior; the people, settings and situations that promoted success; and the roadblocks they encountered. The major themes explored in this chapter include: the re-entry woman student's commitment to learning; the powerful role of faculty in the learning experience; the in-and-out-of classroom experiences that made a difference in the re-entry woman's success; and the benchmarks re-entry women used to assess their achievement.

### A Commitment to Learning

For many of the women interviewed for this study, the two-year college became the central community in their lives as they pursued their degrees. They spent considerable periods of time on the college campus, and they took time away from family and friends to

focus on homework, papers, and co-curricular pursuits. Their lives revolved around doing what needed to be done to complete their courses and, ultimately, their degrees. In an effort to understand the determination and commitment to learning that these women demonstrated, four sub-themes are examined: the act of immersion, the type-A student behavior displayed by the re-entry women, the challenge of facing the negative thoughts and beliefs carried into the educational setting, and support systems that strengthened and reinforced the re-entry woman's commitment to learning.

"Once I Had School, It Was *All* About School"

For several re-entry students, family, work and social lives were adjusted to ensure that they could meet their student obligations. They integrated their college experiences into their lives and their lives into their college experience. They learned to involve others in their success and arrange the world to serve their goals, as opposed to arranging their goals to meet the world's expectations. Often this involved completely immersing themselves in the college environment. Shirlene described her commitment to her studies, when she shared:

> I never missed a class in all the four years. I would come in to campus somewhere usually between 7:00-7:30 every morning, even if I didn't have a class until the end of the day. But I was tutoring or working in the lab, whatever. I immersed myself in this school--the whole atmosphere, the whole situation. As long as I was here in the building, I was focused on getting it done. They [my husband and son] were in and out of here constantly. Sometimes they'd come out here and join me for dinner. We'd have a grilled cheese supper special or whatever (laughter). He'd [son] bring

every girlfriend he had sometimes down here.

Ad Lena also found herself adapting her schedule in order to overcome hardships and adjusting her attitude in her effort to reach her educational goal:

> There was a point in time, for eighteen months, that I didn't have any transportation of my own. I didn't have a personal car. So, what I did was very strategically schedule my classes as much as possible at the closer campus, because I could walk from my home--it took about 20-25 minutes, depending on how fast I walked. At the same time it was great exercise, so by the time I got to class the endorphins were going and I was flying! I was ready!
>
> When I could not take courses at the nearby campus, I would come home, change clothes, and--in the dead of winter--of course, the layered look was in! I'd bundle myself up and walk to the bus stop which was about a mile, and take the bus and go to school. I remember on Saturday mornings, when it's 20° below, getting up at five o'clock, getting ready to go to class and bundling up. I would hit the street by six o'clock because I had to hit the first bus going west at 6:30 a.m. So, I would walk over there--snow, rain, whatever. It was a must. Because, you see, I didn't have a choice. There was no choice to stay home and not go to class because it was cold out or because I had to walk to the bus. It was a matter of commitment to a goal. And no one could take that commitment for me. I had to take it for myself.

Aja, likewise, immersed herself in her college studies. As she put it, her entire

lifestyle revolved around school: "I had tunnel vision; once I had school, it was *all* about school. 'I can't do this because I have to study' or 'I can't do that.' Everything was I couldn't do it because I was studying or I got a project or--everything was about school." Unfortunately for Aja, immersion in her studies took a toll. She recalled, "I think maybe I sat out one semester. I don't know if I was just tired. I'd been going for a while and I felt I needed a breather. But as soon as I did, I started missing the classes and the deadlines and all. So I went back." For Aja, college had become so integrated into her routine that when she took a "breather," she felt the loss of something that was an important part of who she was and wanted to be.

Perhaps more dramatically than some others, Dina adjusted her life to connect with her college experience by quitting her job and relocating to a new part of the country. This fact kept her motivated toward success; she recalled, "I had the 'you just quit your job!!' voice on my shoulder, saying 'you'd better stick with this!'" Sticking to it meant structuring the day around classes. Dina's schedule "really varied during the time that I was there [GTC]--and I was there for three years. Mostly I would go from 8:00 in the morning until noon, five days a week, and I would work from noon until 6:00 or 7:00 p.m., then go home, do homework, and go back to school."

Several of the women interviewed for this study accepted jobs on campus in order to support their college programs. They worked in various departments, attended classes and studied with friends, and met their children at the day care center when they were done. They became known commodities at their colleges, as much a part of the culture as the permanent staff.

Other re-entry women found special places to study where their colleagues were sure to find them. The library reading room at WBCC was mentioned by several women; the library conference rooms at MVCC were so often used that Shirlene teasingly shared: "when I die I'm gonna have somebody put a metal plate on the door, 'this room a memorial to. . .'." Open computer labs became meeting places for students without equipment at home; tutoring offices were heavily trafficked by many students--as student tutors or as students being tutored. The re-entry women interviewed typically focused on school while at their college campuses. They seldom sat around the big-screen television or chatted with friends. They were there for a purpose--an educational purpose. Caitlynn described the focus she brought to her learning activities:

> It was just like, "I'm doing this--get out of my way!" I would literally barrel down the halls to get to class. "I can't be late!" I was like the grade school kid who starts high school and--you're not supposed to do that. It's not cool, but I didn't care! [Caitlynn:]"Get out of my way!" [Friend:]"Do you want to go smoke a cigarette?" [Caitlynn:]"I don't have time!" [Friend:]Class isn't for ten minutes!" [Caitlynn:] "I don't care! I've got to get to class!" And it was one classroom away! So I was really gung-ho. And I stayed that way until, really, my last semester.

By immersing themselves in the community college experience, these re-entry women students maintained their focus and commitment to learning. They encountered travel hardships, peer pressure, family expectations, and myriad other diversionary issues as they worked to complete their two-year degrees. In addition to immersing themselves in

their colleges in order to facilitate their learning goals, this group of students engaged in other behaviors to ensure success. The following section examines the strategies adopted by the re-entry students to maintain their focus and commitment.

Tales from the Front Row

They called themselves "over-achievers," "type-A personalities," and just "good students." Whatever term selected, these re-entry women students clearly worked hard for their degrees and made a 150% commitment to their educational goals. It was important to them that they be seen and heard as active participants in their learning process. They sat in the front of the class. They often audio recorded lectures. They sought additional help and advice from faculty or tutoring resources. Frequently, they went above and beyond what was expected. Shirlene shared:

> It is hard work, there's just no doubt about it. One of the things that I did that made it probably harder on myself than it needed be. . .was I did every problem in that [math] book. Each one. Each class. I did every problem in that book. I didn't want to miss anything. I knew I'd be taking 116 [Technical Mathematics II] later, because, 115 [Technical Mathematics I] was the required minimum for the degree. Which I think is why it was recommended I go there. 116 wasn't required, but I thought that if I had wanted to take calculus or something on the higher end later, I needed to have 116. I would be taking it down the road. So, I didn't want to miss anything in 115 because I didn't want to get into 116 and then not remember what I did in 115. So I did it all.

Not wanting to miss anything, the re-entry women in this study positioned themselves front and center in the classroom. Acutely aware of their lack of recent educational experience and sometimes hindered by lack of success in previous academic endeavors, the re-entry students sought to absorb the entire experience by sitting closest to the action--the faculty member.

The classrooms in their colleges that did not involve laboratory or studio work were most frequently configured in the traditional straight row pattern, facing the teaching station at the front of the room near the whiteboard or podium. Most of the students reported that sitting in the very front of the room compensated for hearing or sight difficulties or helped to establish their identity with the instructor. Annie shared: "I'd go in, sit where I wanted to sit, which was at the front because I'm shorter than most. And yet, when I was in high school, I was always hoping I was assigned to a seat in the back so I could disappear!"

Lee observed a pattern to classroom seating:

> I was always up front, and this was not only because I was a good student, but I wanted to hear everything. I have a hearing disability. That front row usually had returning students--adult students--and we were the ones that were in the front row most often. It was mostly women, but occasionally it was a few men.

Dina also expressed a preference for the front row:

> I think it might have had a lot to do with my age; I'm sure it was because of my age. I'm pretty comfortable with myself, and I would find that I was one of the few who would just open up in class. And, I had a math instructor who

said he was glad to have me in class--it was someone to talk to! (laughter)

Lee further reflected on the classroom set-up:

> If there was a women's studies class--the chairs were in a circle with students facing each other. And, I liked that; we could discuss. [At GTC] my instructors could sit and discuss a lot of things--even my math instructor even before we got to board work--so, why can't we all look at each other and share? Don't *we* have any ideas about this? But we seldom did. It was always rows of students facing the instructor.

Being seen and heard was important to these women who were determined to succeed at their academic goals. They saw themselves as learners and resources for their classes. They invested heavily in their education, and were committed to learning. As Shirlene noted:

> When I had a class I sat front row, dead center. And I'm probably usually the most vocal person in the class. And it's great to be vocal if you're right in the front, because you can interact not only with the instructor, but the people around you who do not speak out, they tend to flock closer to you. I'd make it a point to say hello to people like that and try to bring them out. Because, the attitude is, especially among professors or teachers--or even the mouthy student who sits at the front of the class (laughter)--the person who sits at the back of the room is the person who's not interested, or too shy to speak up, or just is lacking in confidence.

This commitment to learning, demonstrated by not merely enrolling and taking up

space, but by strategically positioning one's self in the classroom to be in the center of the activity, was expressed time and again by the re-entry women students who were interviewed for this study. And they demonstrated that commitment in other "super-student" ways as well.

A good example is Annie, who claimed that "math was my bug-a-boo. It took me five semesters to get that one semester's credit!" Despite the effort it took to overcome this poor record, Annie plodded forward in good spirit, looking to learn the material, not just get a passing grade. She observed:

> I'm not great at math, but I liked the classes! I loved being in them. I loved what they were talking about. I just--it was such a change from more than fifty years before to then--even the language was different! I started out with that course for people who have been away from math for a while, and I did real well in that. So I took basic algebra. By the middle of November, I thought, even if I pass, there's no way that I'll ever be able to pull my weight in the next class. So, I talked to the instructor, who didn't want me to drop it. He said, "I'm sure you'll come out of this with a C." And I said, "I just don't feel I have enough of it." And so I withdrew. Then I took [Dr. Smith], and I needed that extra semester. Then I moved on to [Dr. Jones] for Fundamentals of Math, and I failed that semester. I mean, I learned a lot, but I still failed. And I loved it. And I loved her [Dr. Jones]. And so, I repeated that class. Thank heavens! I had [Dr. Conway], and I had her for the same class--although it was different because they had changed the course work--it

was interesting to me. But I couldn't hang on to all of the different things. So, I did get a C and I was so relieved! We had our final exam the Monday after Graduation. So there were three of us who were in the same boat. We needed that grade. And each of us had an honor cord! We wondered if we failed that course, if we'd have to hang ourselves with our honor cord! (Laughter.)

Annie's good sense of humor probably helped her through this challenge and others!

There are numerous examples of the incredible determination and the commitment that these re-entry women students made to learning while enrolled as community college students. One cannot help but applaud the dedication of Mary C., who enrolled in a day-time section of economics and went back to sit in on the evening section of the class when she didn't quite grasp the theories. Or Caitlynn, who couldn't afford to re-take a mathematics class in which she got a C grade, so she followed a friend's progress through the class and re-took the tests with her to prove to herself that she could do the required work. These are just a few of the stories told by the women in his study.

"I Psyched Myself Out"

At times, the re-entry woman's greatest challenge was conquering her own fears. Although it is evident that they were committed to learning and completing their degrees, it is also evident that the challenge was not without its setbacks and sorrows. At times, it was the re-entry women's own histories or beliefs that provided the stumbling blocks to their success. Alluded to earlier, the following rich example is provided by Caitlynn:

The lowest grade I ever got [at MVCC] was a C, and it was in a class that was

> so simple! It was a business math class, and it was so simple that I complicated it. I went into the class saying, "I'm not gonna be good at this!" Fractions--I had never been good at those! I terrified myself, that's what I really did. I don't know why; it just petrified me. And after I took the class, a girlfriend of mine went back to school and she took the class. I took it, basically, with her, because I felt so bad. I'd "Ace" almost everything! She'd bring me home a copy of what they had done that day, or whatever. I'd sit down and do it in my spare time, and then I'd give it to her the next day. I'd be in the hall--it'd be like, "Grade this, girl." And she'd call me that night, and she'd be like, "Caitlynn, why??" Because I psyched myself out. I said [to myself] "I'm not gonna do good in this class. I'm not gonna make it, and I'm just gonna be a failure. And I was."

The "self-fulfilling prophesy" may have worked against Caitlynn in that class, but she did not allow it to handicap her future performance. She actively took steps to confirm and affirm her abilities by completing the necessary work. She committed herself to learning excellence, and she met her goal.

Ad Lena described her biases about mathematics courses in terms of gender. When asked by a teacher why she stayed after class each month for additional tutoring, she reflected:

> Maybe it's some of the "leftover stuff," when we girls were children. . .were little girls. . .and the idea was that girls doing math was just not possible. . .we were not capable of math and science. Our best pursuit was in the arts,

not the sciences. Maybe that was part of it. I had always done excellently in math. I've never made less than a B in math--ever, ever! As a child, as a teenager, I did well with chemistry, calculus, the whole nine yards! Still, that gnawed at me, that this is just beyond my capability--maybe that's why I tried so hard-- it was gnawing at me that this was difficult. I mean, I do my own income taxes, I always balance my checkbook--but ask me to take the "M" class, and I panic!

Linda carried her insecurities into the speech class she took. She recalled:

That was the most scary class I ever took (laughter). I'm not one for standing up in front of a bunch of people. He [the teacher] told us that first day that we were there, "By the time you get through this class you will not be scared to stand up and give a lecture." And most of that was true. I was still shaky when we gave our final lecture, but he informed us that we were there to learn and he would not tolerate anyone snickering or laughing at somebody if they get nervous or drop whatever. And I thought everybody did good, considering that none of us had ever got up in front of a bunch of people and gave a speech on anything. I wouldn't want to get up and do it again (laughter)! But that was one of the classes--we had major classes and we had elective classes--and that was one of the classes we needed. So, it was scary, but I got through it. And everybody else got through it!

Being committed to a goal means doing what needs to be done to achieve it. As Linda noted, she and her re-entry women colleagues took the "scary" classes, because they

were required. In the process, they learned to face their fears and conquer them. And Linda learned a good deal about herself and her potential as well. When questioned about one of the best experiences she had at MVCC, Linda commented:

> I guess the only thing that I could really think of that was a good experience--scary--was the speech class I was talking about. Learning to stand up in front of people and give a speech without stuttering and shaking--of course, there were times when I was still going like this [shakes]! I would say that was really the best experience that anybody could have--to be able to take that class and be able to stand up in front of the class; even to give a five minute speech--to be able to do that. As I said, I'm not one to stand up and talk to a bunch of people, but half-way through the class I was feeling more at ease. I had a fantastic teacher, and I would think that's the best experience I could think of. To be able to do that.

Prior experiences clearly influenced the ways that women re-entry students faced their classes. Lack of understanding about Gayl's learning disability had led to the adoption of a whole set of feelings that she had to confront in college. Understandably, she encountered her past in classes which made her least comfortable. Gayl shared:

> I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the class. I was afraid I wasn't gonna be able to recall the information under pressure on a test. I was afraid that with my attention deficit disorder I wouldn't be able to stay focused in the class. I was terrified! But I wanted to try. And, I figured that maybe if I just took courses that I'm interested in--.like the humanities-- then

> I would do well because it was something that I was interested in. And I remembered when I was in high school, those were the classes I was getting As in. In that respect, I was much more comfortable. But when I found out that I had to get into the math and science courses--the ones that gave me the most horrible fits earlier-- those were the ones that terrified me. I felt totally, totally vulnerable. I was afraid of looking like a fool in class; being stupid, asking questions and "God girl, are you stupid!!" You know, it's the same tape I had in high school. And that was the challenge for me. I had that feeling of being a "pretender," that somehow someone was going to find out that I was stupid--not learning disabled--but stupid. That was the greatest difficulty for me.

When questioned about the situations that finally convinced Gayl that she was intelligent and would not be "found out," she replied:

> I don't know. It was a gradual process. It was the feedback that I was getting from professors; it was the feedback that I was getting on my assignments. Getting back As consistently in several of the classes--not only on exams, but on papers. It was the feedback that I started getting from students. People asking me what my opinion was on something. People asking me if I knew the answer on something; or what was my perspective on something? That showed me that other people respected my opinions, and, therefore, I couldn't be nearly as inept as I thought I might be. And that helped, too. Like I said, it was a process. It wasn't any one thing that changed.

Setting a goal and achieving it can have a powerful influence on people. The re-entry women in this study demonstrated the power of their commitment through the changes they made in their lives to focus on the goal, through the changes they made in their behaviors and actions, and through recognition of the thoughts that were holding them back and confrontation of these negative influences. In this process of change, they committed themselves to learn subject matter and to develop personal insights and strengths that would have long-term benefits.

It wasn't always an easy process. Ad Lena described her battle with demons in this way:

> Listen, honey, let me tell you, there was enough crying in those four years to at least fill a small pond in somebody's back yard! There were times when my daughter would get up at 2:00 o'clock in the morning and I hadn't gone to bed yet. Those were math class times (laughter)!!! And there were times when I stayed up all night studying. . .doing math mostly. . .when I think about it. . .it was math. I would go home after work and do what I needed to do. . . set the table, eat, study and do math. I would stay there all night, then, at 6:00 o'clock (a.m.) I'd hit the shower and go to work.

Several women in this study shared Ad Lena's periodic despair. They spoke of melting into tears in their beds after the children were asleep, or waking up in a sweat and shouting their desire to quit their studies. But they never did quit. They prayed. They studied. They re-focused on their goals. They called and talked to friends. They found strength in their own success and in the support of others.

"You Know, Mom's Day You're Supposed to be Home": The Salience of Support Systems

Commitment to learning was an essential ingredient that contributed to the success of the re-entry women students studied. They did not have many successful family role models for whom education was a defining factor. They did not have unlimited or unconditional financial backing, and they often carried the baggage of prior educational failures or deferred dreams of college. In some cases, the commitment that these women made in their studies was bolstered by the support of family and friends; in other cases, however, the commitment was bolstered by the lack of support they received from their family and friends.

Over half of the participants spoke of the positive support they received from faculty and friends. Fifteen out of the eighteen could identify family members--husbands, children, siblings or parents--who were supportive of their efforts to complete an associate's degree. The members of their support systems took on extra duties at home, tolerated their absences from meals or family parties during exam periods or class nights, and offered encouragement during the times when school became overwhelming. Several women admitted that their husbands' support was based upon the anticipation of additional income once the degree was attained. Others reported that younger children enjoyed having their mothers doing homework at the kitchen table as they did theirs, and older children were sometimes skeptical--but usually pleased--when their moms brought home good grades. As Shirlene noted, "My son didn't think I would be as good in school as I was. He thought that I would be in over my head, especially when I took that summer course. He was knocked over by it! And it challenged him when I started pulling down As, and improved his motivation to do

well."

Lee described her experience as follows:

> I had, I want to say support, but I think it was tolerance. Because I let them know--and, obviously, my husband knew how focused I was from my military life; because I was very much like that in my military days. If it was something I wanted to do, then I was very, very focused. I think my husband knew that and kind of accepted it. On the weekends my husband would take the kids to the movies and I'd stay home and do homework. And that was something that I really didn't get to enjoy, to do things like that with my family. But, I would say, "Ok, you take the boys and go do this [or that]. I've got to stay home while the house is quiet."

Almost half of the women reported members of the family that were discouraging to them, who didn't understand or approve of the time and energy they devoted to school. Gayl's husband was very supportive, encouraging her and connecting her with scholarship and tutoring resources available through his Masonic Lodge. Surprisingly, she encountered resistance on other fronts:

> My mother developed this attitude that my being in school was not important. And that was very painful for me. I think part of that is the fact that she kept telling me it was something I should have done when I was younger. But I think that's also what she tells herself, because she dropped out when she was like a senior in high school.

Gayl continued:

> . . . but I never felt that I had the support of my own family for my being in school. In fact, when I graduated from GTC, not one person from my side of the family showed up at my party. Loads of people from my husband's side of the family, and lots of family friends--but no one from my side of the family. And I think [my son], instead of being encouraged by me being in school or responding to an example, resented my being in school. I think with him it was a sense of "one-upmanship"--you're just doing this to make yourself look better than me. It wasn't that at all. I was just trying to provide some encouragement for him in the beginning, and then, it was like, "Well, fine--if you want to drop out of school go ahead. I'm gonna keep going." He did graduate from high school, but he couldn't make it in college. I decided that I was going to get my degree, and I didn't care who or what got in my way. It was going to happen!

Other women encountered equally uncomfortable reactions. Mary C.'s family "thought I was nuts!" Letha thought her kids "were pretty proud of me--I think," although one daughter "was kind of jealous because she didn't go. But she had the opportunity, she just didn't go." Similarly, Aja observed:

> It seemed like everybody was kind of discouraging about it. When I first told her I was gonna be a doctor, my mom wasn't encouraging about it. I told her a long time ago, and when I really, officially decided, I didn't tell her right away. I just started doing what I needed to do to get the ball rolling. Then I told her, and, of course, she said, "It's gonna take forever!" Well,

> whatever. I know, and I don't want to hear it. Whatever it takes I'm gonna do it. And she just didn't say anything else. She left it alone. [She wanted me to ] work. Work. Earn money, and that's pretty much it.

Despite the sometimes painful lack of support, despite their age, and despite the other responsibilities of their lives, these re-entry women were determined to meet their degree goals. Ultimately, this commitment and determination was a badge of honor for these women. It brought them not only a degree, but a sense of themselves. As Mary C. noted:

> It's hard for moms to go back to school with a family. If you want to do good, it takes work. You can't just think, "Oh, I was smart in school, I'll be smart in college." You can't. But it does prepare you. When I was working, for example, we used to have college people come in with a degree in American literature and sit there in the purchasing department at a high tech plant and make a lot of money, while those of us that sat there and did the work were not getting that same pay scale. I thought it was very unfair.
>
> But one thing that I learned from this is that it takes determination and it takes work to get through college. And if you have succeeded--if you've gotten a degree--then the employer knows that you can make a commitment. I never realized that aspect of it before. When they're putting somebody into a position, they want to make sure they're gonna be there for five years or so; [that they're] taking a chance on somebody who's proved that they can make a commitment to that kind of process makes more sense than just taking somebody who's been plodding along, but will they--or won't

they--make that commitment to do a really good job? College students have learned that you have to pursue excellence, so I can see now where that is a factor. And I resented it totally when I was on the other foot. But I can see--I still don't think it's always right--but I can see that it does prove that you've had to stick to something.

It's very difficult for moms [Mary C. continued]. And people I knew that didn't have support from their family--it's real sad. You've gotta have it. Family has to be able to say, "I understand that you're gone three nights this week because you're studying." On Mother's Day, I went out with my family to dinner and then went out to the college and stayed there until it closed. In the dark, by myself, in one of those study areas, because I had a big test coming up. It was finals week, and I had something that was really bothering me and I wanted to go over the whole thing from the beginning. You know, Mom's Day you're supposed to be home. And that was kind of an odd thing to do, because my kids were young enough they were upset about it--but not that upset.

When asked what were the "hardest" and "easiest" parts of being a re-entry woman student, the answers were surprisingly similar. The graduates recalled having the most difficulty with issues that were somewhat under their control: lack of confidence, guilt at spending time away from the family, and harnessing the discipline needed to complete homework, study, and tackle difficult subjects. The easiest parts of the process involved the actual "being there and doing it." For the most part, the re-entry women in this study felt that

having made the commitment to learning, the rest was just implementation. Fortunately for them, they found that their community college environments were supportive of older students, permitting them to assume comfortable work loads and set their own pace in completing their degrees.

## The Faculty: Taking Time to Care

The re-entry students who were interviewed acknowledged the role that their commitment and effort played in their academic success. No one mentioned "luck" or "fate" when talking about the changes that college enrollment made in their lives, instead; they talked about adaption, challenge and rewarding hard work. They recognized, however, that they were very often blessed with faculty who valued and understood the thirst for knowledge that re-entry students brought to the classroom and who were committed to the teaching and learning process and student success. In short, the faculty cared. To them, students were more than merely numbers and grades--they were individuals with unique histories, failings and strengths. To these faculty, students were not the "tabula rasa" upon which to imprint their knowledge--they were living, breathing people who required patience, feedback, and understanding. This section examines the powerful role that faculty played in helping re-entry women students develop their sense of success, intellectual ability and personal value. Also examined are those faculty whose negative attitudes and interactions served to strengthen the re-entry women's sense of themselves.

### Positive Faculty: Understanding Re-entry Women Students

The re-entry women students reported fond memories of their community college faculty, memories which revolved around stimulating conversations, supportive actions, and

challenging assumptions. Letha recalled the English teacher who expanded a journal assignment to help her meet the composition requirements during the semester her brother was dying and she had to commute to Arizona. Ad Lena recalled the part-time math instructor who spent several hours after each Saturday class to review her questions, always assuring her that she had the ability to do the work. And seventy-seven year old Annie remembered the teacher who refused to set her apart from the others, and *didn't* give her an extension when she forgot to turn in the assignment that she'd completed weeks before.

Generally, faculty were viewed as teammates, working toward the successful exchange of information and ideas. A number of those interviewed felt that they were held in a very positive light by the faculty in their community colleges, and that special care was given to understanding the unique situations of re-entry women to ensure their success.

Forty-eight year old Ad Lena shared:

> People like me were not undermined in the classroom because we were older and obviously hadn't been in school for many years. The teachers were encouraging and recognized that it was tougher on us. So, given that, they were willing to go the extra mile to help you feel comfortable in the class-- even having dialogue with them after class, during class. The teachers also recognized the level of commitment that older students bring; that we have to be more committed to learning to be successful in that environment, because we're not young anymore. We're either in transition or we're looking at changing careers, or we just want a degree.

Mary C. echoed the sentiment when talking about a biology class at Williams Bay

County College. She recalled:

> They were very supportive, never hesitating to answer a question, never looking at me like "that's dumbest thing I ever heard!" If you're doing lab work, let it be a mixed bag of people, not just sticking me with all young people. Maybe adjusting the team a bit. And, most importantly, answering questions and not making me feel stupid--because I really felt stupid. When you're in a college level class, you come into biology with every single teacher thinking that there's not a single student out there that's never seen the inside of a cell before, and I hadn't. So it was real important to not be looked down upon, and I do not think that they did that.

Over and over, the participants in this study spoke of the ways they interacted with faculty that made so much difference in their lives. Dina's memory of her first class was particularly moving:

> Now, on my first day of class--I'm in a class, mind you, with a bunch of kids who just graduated from high school--I'm one of the oldest people there, and I'm in elementary algebra, a course that won't even transfer. I'm very nervous. I hated math, hated it so much when I was a kid, especially when I was in high school. The male teachers didn't even care if I could do it or not. So, here I have this really bombastic, Italian professor, and he asks us, "Is there anybody who doesn't know how to do this?" And he writes on the board something like 4 - 6 = ? And I was the only person to raise my hand. Well, he begins the lesson to show us how to add negative numbers, and he

> goes, "Ok, now I want everybody to write this . . . ." And this is what I wrote--and why this notebook is so important to me: *"09/08/92. I, Dina, have learned that I can add signed numbers, and I can subtract signed numbers."* And it just changed everything. HE changed everything! He told everybody, "I'm gonna show you how to do this; I'm gonna tell you how to talk to yourselves so you can do this!" He made us all feel we could succeed!

For Dina, this was a life-changing event, as she decided to declare mathematics as her major and has since completed a baccalaureate degree at a technological institute.

Renee, also, expressed appreciation for a faculty member who took special time with her. She recalled:

> I had this one class in social science, maybe earth science--I can't think of his name--and he was the first person, the first professor, that actually talked to me about how I studied. It was a science class. Why can't I think of his name? I'm usually pretty good! He actually went over my notes with me, the way I took notes in class, and the way I studied. We actually talked about typing my notes at the end of the class, just reading through them at the end of class, and even re-reading through ones that you already read through.

When asked to provide a context for this discussion, Renee clarified:

> Actually, the class took a test and the class didn't do well as a whole. I got like a B-/C+. He told us that from that point it would probably be getting harder. So I went to talk to him, thinking, "Ok, if I'm struggling to get a B- or C+, next time it may be worse." So I went to him to see exactly what his

> tests would be made of, and if there were certain ways that we should study to get the material, because he didn't ask the big definitions in the book--he asked the smaller things so that he knew that you studied. And so I went to talk with him, and he asked to see my notes. I'm thinking, "Ok, I take pretty good notes." And they would make sense to me, but if I read them back to you, would I be able to see the thought pattern that had gone on during the lecture? No, I was pretty much taking "highlight notes," like most people. Actually, he talked to me about how I studied: how long I studied each day; how consistent I was; how thorough my notes were; did I use study guides? I remember seeing him at graduation. I got a C out of the class. I went over and thanked him, because I knew what he had given me.

Interactions with faculty validated the re-entry woman's worth and accomplishments. Students truly did change the way they talked to themselves when faculty gave them permission to take care of their own needs first. Diana expressed the power a faculty member can bear--especially as re-entry women begin their studies--when she said:

> I wish for every GTC student to get those first instructors to be caring. To keep up with them and encourage them. They would stay--more would stay. Especially going back to school, you have so many problems that you didn't anticipate. And if an instructor shows or gives some kind of encouragement, that could be like a turning point that you could do it. You have to juggle everything else, but this is the big thing. This is what you really need to do. The other stuff--unless it's life or death--it'll be there.

Letha recounted a bad start in the required math class, and how an instructor's guidance helped her succeed:

> I took the general math, and I took it with one lady and I flunked the first test. So I withdrew because I knew I was gonna flunk the whole class, and there's no point in doing that. And so, the next time I took it, I took it with--I thought I'd never forget his name--he just retired the year I graduated. If I heard the name I'd know it. Anyway, I took it with him and I think I did get pretty close to an A on that one. He told us at the beginning of class, he said, "If you have a question and you don't ask it, it's your fault. Because if you have a question and these other people don't want to listen to it, and they go 'uhhhh,' they can get up and walk out. Because *you* are the important one." He told the whole class that, so if I had a question, you can bet I was asking!

Many of the lessons learned from faculty with long-forgotten names relate to the time, care, and permission given to these women which allowed them to see their lives and themselves differently. Although most of the women interviewed named the faculty in their major areas of study, it was just as often these unnamed faculty who provided them with the support, direction, and inspiration to change their lives.

Sometimes the feedback from faculty was incredibly personal and direct. For instance, a black English instructor became a role model for Datoria, who recalled being told: "Datoria, you see anything you want in this world you can get it. But strive for it. Life is about suffering, but you always have a chance. If you sit back and let it pass you by, it will--just like time. But if you get up and do it, you can do it!"

Likewise, Ad Lena recalled the last session in one of her classes:

> The last class, I handed in my exam, and the teacher, she looked at me and she said, "Ad Lena, you're a brilliant woman. You really are." That's what she said. She caught me by surprise. I said, "Thank you." She said, "You're welcome." For her to say that to me, I was taken aback by it because it was so surprising! I don't consider myself as brilliant. Didn't. Don't! I work hard. I really have a burning desire to learn.

Faculty also provided a reality check for these students, as in the case of Annie, who "for years went around thinking, 'Gosh, I should have known this or that before I came to this class,' or 'I should have taken this first instead of the other thing.'" Finally, Annie's counselor talked it through with her and said, "You don't expect to memorize all of those books, do you? You can't do that!" Annie had no response, because she had, in fact, thought she would learn all she needed to know in a complete and sequential fashion.

Mary C. summarized the faculty role succinctly when she said, "the influence at the college was a lot, as far as making me feel that what I was doing was real. Because, when you're not an expert, and you don't have education, you are very skeptical and wonder, 'Is this really as good as I think it is?' So having his professional opinion and suggestions was really helpful."

The investment made by faculty in their students reinforced the re-entry woman's sense of value and intelligence. Interviews with these graduates provided multiple examples of the ways in which faculty members helped these women change their perceptions of themselves and feel a valued part of the educational community. As Gayl described it:

> The relationships that I had with the professors was a kind of mutual respect and understanding and ability to communicate with them. I think part of that was because it was almost like, although they were professors, they were also peers. You were an adult, and you could talk like adults. They never had to worry about whether I was being respectful or doing homework. It cut through a lot of that.

This mutual and respectful teacher/student dynamic was a feature attributed to the community college environment. The women in this study shared the perception that classrooms in the community college were often special places because many instructors were so dedicated to student success and the learning process. While acknowledging that she had encountered solid faculty at the university to which she transferred, Ad Lena depicted the special tenor in the community college when she stated:

> I would want other students to be open to experiencing the high level of commitment of so many of the teachers. To realize that at the junior college--and there are teachers at the universities I know--but at the junior college, the teachers are invested in the students as people--not as merely students in the class, but they're invested in students as people. I want them to feel that sense of commitment from their teachers. Teachers are genuinely interested and willing to help you to learn and grow and grow. They're not just committed to throwing the material out at you. More, they truly are committed to helping you grow. And that is a tremendous gift. [It is] certainly less traumatizing if you have a teacher who is really committed to

> helping you along, to learn the processes and understand them--not just go through the mechanics, but to really understand the process of coming to the right answer.

Faculty: The Negative Case

Although caring, encouraging, and challenging instructors were most frequently identified as the best experience community colleges had to offer, poor instructors were consistently cited as the worst part of these re-entry women's experiences. MG recalled the

> one or two instructors I've had who treat you like you're stupid and so they're not going to challenge you in any way; acting like, "why are you here?!?" and [faculty] who shouldn't be there to begin with and really just shouldn't be teaching. They're burned out and make you feel like garbage. I've had a few, and I've seen their effect on people, and they just shouldn't be there. It kills your confidence, and these students just wonder why they're there; because, according to the teacher--the one who's giving them a grade, the one who supposedly knows everything--he's telling me I'm not worth the effort. And that's a lousy thing to do to a person.

Diana encountered argumentative faculty, as she watched "students ask a question, and they wouldn't get a straight answer. They would get an argument." These students learned quickly not to have new ideas or express their lack of understanding in those classrooms. Linda never understood the instructor who tried to teach WordPerfect 6.1 by lecturing, and Robin wondered if she would have learned more about drafting if her teacher had spent more time on basics and less on joking around during class. Other re-entry women

commented on their uncaring or inept faculty, but, like Mary C., concluded, "I think you need the bad teacher experiences. It's part of life, so I can't complain about that."

Often in describing their experiences, re-entry women placed the burden for success upon themselves rather than being critical of the faculty member's style or lack of competence. They believed that if they worked harder, they would be successful. This was not always the case. Mary C.'s description of one faculty member provides a particularly vivid example of a rigid instructional style. The class was economics--a class which should have complemented Mary C.'s experience of working with different markets and supply and demand as a real estate agent. She recalled:

> I got a C in economics--that was my worst experience at Williams Bay. [The instructor] had been around a good deal. He made a big, big deal out of the fact that he usually only has ten percent of his class list at the end of the year--which was the truth. We started out with 40 something students and ended up with 8. He had a point system that was cut and dried; there was nothing that you could do above and beyond. And he taught his own economics. We had a book, but we used it very, very little. It was his own style--you either got it or you didn't get it.
>
> So, [Mary C. continued,] I would attend the class and not get it, and then attend his class again. He'd have a night class, and I'd sit in on the night class and listen to the lecture again. He was not willing to work with you. And then, I did poorly on the first test. That was when I decided to sit in on the other classes and really work hard. And, because I did poorly on the first

test--even though I did well on every other test--because he's on the point system, I was like two points short of a B. I approached him and said, "Is there something I can do? I've worked really hard." And he knew I'd been to both sets of classes.

I said, "I just had that really bad test to begin with, and I've never been able to offset it." Unless you had straight As, a low D is not-- you can't bring it up. So, that was the problem. He wasn't willing to do it., and I got a C in that stinking class. Everyone was saying, "drop out of it," and I said, "I will *never* take economics again, as long as I live! I *hate* the subject. I *hate* this class. I worked my butt off, and I was convinced that I was gonna be able to pull that B.

Mary C. concluded her critique of the instructor in this way:

His method was just really dorky. It was a shame. I think I would have done fine if I had had a different teacher. I just could not work it out with this man. We'd spend ten minutes in class talking about the Cubs! I'm a White Sox fan! Don't give me ten minutes on the Cubs. He went to every home game early to catch fly balls. And he would just talk and talk about it. I wanted to shoot him. [I'd think,] "Would you *please* talk more about your stupid system of economics so that I can figure this out?!?!" Like I said, three quarters of the class dropped out. Those of us who stuck it out got punished.

For good or bad, community college faculty clearly played an important role in the success of the re-entry woman students in this study. When both the student and faculty were

committed to learning, a dynamic setting for education and growth was evident. Central to this equation was the methodology around which teaching and learning interactions developed. The next section examines re-entry womens' responses to the various educational strategies they encountered.

## Teaching/Learning Interactions: Contributions to Student Success

The attitudes and actions of community college faculty clearly have an impact upon the students with whom they interact. Faculty who demonstrate respect, offer reliable feedback, and expend the time to support a student's success can make a real difference for the re-entry woman who is working toward an educational goal while juggling family obligations, balancing economic pressures, and searching to define her worth in the educational arena. Conversely, faculty who bring to the classroom a focus on the "teaching" rather than the "learning" part of the teaching/learning equation can set up a dynamic that is argumentative or unreasonably structured, and too often works against the student's desire to feel and be accomplished. This section moves beyond the relationship between the student and the faculty to examine the formal teaching and learning interactions upon which these relationships were built.

Each of the re-entry women in this study spent between one-and-a-half and fifteen years in community college classrooms, including computer and science labs, lecture halls and art studios, theatres and seminar rooms. In these classrooms, teachers shared a body of knowledge, guiding the students as they interacted with the information and each other to ensure mastery of the subject or skill. As they studied, the re-entry women who were interviewed developed a good sense of what did and did not contribute to their success as

learners. This section examines the major themes related to structured learning as it occurred for these women in the community colleges they attended. These themes revolve around the students' desires to have clear expectations of their work and professors who could teach, and their preference to be active participants in their learning endeavors. In this regard, students critique the value of teaching/learning strategies involving class discussion, group projects, and "chalk talk," a process of using physical display boards to work through concepts in class.

Clear Expectations/Real Teachers

Given the commitment to learning made by the re-entry women students in this study, it is not unexpected that they preferred instructors who articulated clear expectations on their course syllabi and who taught in a manner which followed some logical progression or flow. They had things to do, and they did not have the time or interest to second-guess the requirements or try to figure out what the teacher really wanted you to learn from a particular assignment or text.

Lee likened the faculty member to an employer and the syllabus to the job description when she shared an insight that came to her early in her college career. Talking to herself, Lee observed:

> "Ok, Lee, you've done this. And you've had so many bosses, it's just like having a new boss. And, by the way, when they give you that syllabus and they say they want a 300 word paper? By golly, Lee, that's what they mean--a 300 word paper!" And when you're in a class and those kids think they can turn in a 200 word paper--and you follow what the syllabus says--then you're

in pretty good shape!

Lee reinforced this desire for clarity with the following description of a "good class":

> For me, a good class at WBCC was where you had a professor that wrote you a good syllabus, a syllabus that said exactly what was expected. And when they gave you a textbook they mainly stayed on the subjects in the text. And they didn't go off on their little tangents--which were nice but really a bummer if they tried to test you because, if you are not attuned, or you didn't take good notes, you were lost. If you couldn't have the back-up of the textbook, if they were giving you a lecture on Freud and you couldn't go back, or you couldn't check his various stages, that was bad. That was really bad. So, I didn't like it when I had a professor who did do that, and occasionally I had one. And it made it more difficult.

In addition to clearly outlining the student's obligations to the course, the re-entry women who were interviewed preferred faculty members who had a grasp of the material they were hired to teach and who understood the students in their classrooms. These women recognized the difference between an instructor who knew his or her material, and an instructor who knew how to teach that material. Shirlene described a challenging class in Pascal programming, taught by "a Fortran instructor":

> Fortran and Pascal are just kissing cousins, but there's differences. He would write the code on the board; he didn't write pseudo-code, he wrote the actual code on the board. And he'd be coding this great big long paragraph of things--he'd cover three or four boards--and we'd all be trying to write it

down. And the whole time I'm writing it down I'm going, "Where did this come from? I don't remember seeing this before. I'd circle the areas that I wasn't sure of. This went on several times. Finally, it was always me that stopped him and said, "Professor B., stop right there and go back to this concept and tell me where that was in the book--because I don't remember seeing it." And he'd stop and he'd go back and he'd look. And he'd flip through the book, and he'd be making notes with his left hand and flipping with the right and making notes up on the board. And then he'd stop and he put his hand to his forehead and say, "I'm supposed to be teaching Pascal, aren't I?" So, the whole thing, he would have given us all this code in Fortran and, basically, we ended up doing Pascal pretty much alone, because he was always giving us Fortran codes. That was the first programming course I had. Thank goodness I had a decent book and a decent head. But I was never sure I was getting it right, just simply because he didn't know if he was getting it right (laughter)!

Linda shared the following observation about her geology class at MVCC and the cause of the poor review:

That [geology] was the most boring class. It really wasn't the subject matter. Really, learning about the volcanoes and this or that was pretty interesting, but we had a teacher who was--I think he's in his sixties, but he looked like he was ninety--and he would tell you one thing and then the next week, or maybe it was on a test. There was quite a bit of debate on one of our tests

> where he had said something and several people had it in their notes. He marked it wrong on their test, and two of them got up and walked out of the class with their test saying they were going to take it to the Dean. I don't know what became of it, but he was kind of forgetful about the things he'd said. I think it would have been more interesting if we had somebody that was maybe a little younger. I mean, he taught it well--he was a teacher and so was his wife--but I think he was just getting too old to teach and to remember what he had said.

While Linda offered advanced age as a contributing factor for dissatisfaction with this teacher, Dina pinpointed inexperience as a cause for her distress in her chemistry class. She commented that "Ultimately, my chemistry course challenged me more than anything else. I had a female instructor right out of college, and, for me, she wasn't a good type. She was really nice, but I was just lost."

When asked what the instructor did or didn't do that might have made a difference, Dina speculated:

> I think she took a lot of things for granted-- like that I understood what she was talking about. There was no room for discussion. And, I don't like instructors that are real impatient when they are answering questions. I love it when an instructor says, "Let's go back to the baby steps," even if they tease me about it and say, "Well, let's break that down." What's wrong with that?? And, she [chemistry instructor] never did that, because she wanted us to be with her on a certain level, and I was never there. So I was always

grasping at straws with that class.

The re-entry women in this study wanted to know what was expected of them by their teachers. Additionally, they expected that the classes they took would be taught by instructors who knew the material; knew how to get that material across in a logical and cohesive manner; and knew that at times they would need to simplify their understanding of the material in order to ensure that students would share that understanding. When these components of the educational process were in place, re-entry women students were freed to fully and actively engage in productive learning.

Active Learning

The women in this study expressed a strong preference for learning strategies that allowed them to play an active role in processing information and unearthing insights. Field trips, lecture aids, discussion groups, and work at the chalkboard all provided the desired involvement with the material to be learned and understood. The activities, however, needed to be thoughtfully developed to take into account the subject area and the level of the students. Robin pointed out the fact that teaching and methods needed to be tailored to the students and subject when she noted:

> It all depended. I like history. I took five history classes. For those we had to write reaction papers. One time we had to write a paper on who we thought was responsible for starting WWI. So, in a way I liked that. But then, that was at the beginning. As you get into your classes you start knowing people, and it kind of helps to work in a group. Especially like math classes. I'm not real good at math in certain things, so working together with somebody who

> might explain it a little bit better than the teacher up there was nice. Lectures are ok, but sometimes you sit there thinking, "Just be quiet!" As I was more into MVCC--more into college--as the years went by, it was nice to work with different people on different things. Every now and then, it was nice to just work on your own.

Educators have many instructional strategies available to them. The re-entry women interviewed in this study suggested that collaborative or problem-based learning techniques should blend with more traditional strategies to help students utilize the various learning resources available in a classroom setting and the various learning styles students have adopted. Caitlynn expressed her interest in variety when she asserted her preference for classes that were:

> Hands on. Group activities or hands on. Lecture, pssh, I'm asleep! I'm asleep--you've lost me. Unless--I had one instructor who was in English/speech. He did the speech classes, and one of his classes was a requirement for my degree. It was Public Speaking. And I'm not the kind of person who'll get up in front of people and speak. After that class, I can. I can now, pretty well. But he could talk about anything--about how play-doh is made--anything--and you would just be spell bound. You wouldn't doodle or nothing--you'd just listen to him. So, I guess I could listen to his lectures. But I liked hands on. That's how I learn.

Each of the students in this study expressed a preference for one style of instruction or another. However, they all recognized that everyone learns differently and that

challenging themselves to fully engage in new or uncomfortable activities was often beneficial. Three active teaching/learning strategies were highlighted by the interviewees: classroom discussion, group projects, and use of physical displays--or "chalk talk."

The participants in this study expressed a preference for classes that involved active discussions and challenge, as opposed to passive recording of the instructor's notes. The sense that the student was on a team with the faculty and other students to ensure success was expressed as a positive characteristic of most community college classrooms. Important to that success was the instructor's ability to generate enthusiasm about a subject, utilize creativity in explaining concepts, and render applications of the material to modern life. Gayl described a learning experience that she considered "absolutely phenomenal" in the following way:

> Professor C. got interaction with the class going where everyone was participating in the conversation. No one felt as though they were irrelevant or extraneous or that they had nothing to bring to the table. There was that sense that not only were we learning, but we were sharing with each other and we were learning from that and learning as we were sharing. In other words, as I spoke, I learned. And as I listened, I learned. And perspectives were changed.

When asked to elaborate, Gayl continued:

> She started the semester with "everyone participates or else," and she refused to have anyone sit in the back row of the classroom. That was "verboten!" The only way anyone could sit back there was if all of the other seats were

filled. None of this coming in late and sneaking into the back row--she wanted no part of that! And she would pick a topic--and none of the people that we studied were boring, there wasn't a boring character in it--particularly in the social science class. And we would end up getting a dynamic going where everyone could relate to what was going on. When we were talking about Hitler and the Holocaust, a lot of the kids couldn't quite relate to what was going on. Then she looked at the African American kids, and she pointed out to them that this was kind of like the slave world, only it was worse because people were being killed right there on the spot. And kind of bringing home how this inter-relates to their lives; how this could happen to anyone at any time. How we have to learn from history or we're doomed to repeat it. That people pay for this kind of mistake; that people pay for this kind of error in judgement. And how she would just get you so wrapped up into the thought of it, that even if it was something that you hadn't even thought about before, suddenly you had an insight, and you were able to bring that out. Then somebody else brought something else out that it touched in them. It was just kind of a thing where it wasn't just learning by memory; it was something that became a part of you, it became experiential. And she took us at one point down to the City Museum, and we saw a slave ship. And she went through it with us and she explained it. Here's this little Jewish grandmother, taking us through a slave ship and explaining what all these different things were for, and how they were used, and how the slaves were

forced to leave, and what it was like for them, and just--you were there! That's the kind of teaching that I want to do.

Professor C. offered her students more than just information and links to parallel experiences. She carefully structured her class so that there was an openness to ideas and differences. Gayl reported:

> With some students, [there] was this sense of not being able to communicate with each other for fear that the other one would not understand the barriers between age, culture. We had one class where those barriers just didn't exist. I told you about that one couple, they were taking this class, and they would get into this stuff before class and it was loud and it was obnoxious and it set up this really tough dynamic. But, Professor C. would get in there, and she would start this class and we would all sit in this big circle. And from the moment that we started talking, that the class began, what had happened with that couple was swept out the door, and all of us were able to communicate with each other, using our different experiences to contribute to the class. And we're talking about everything from female circumcision with all its other names and cultural identifications. And we would be talking about some very sensitive issues, [like] spousal abuse. And we'd get into these kinds of issues, and all of us would end up bringing out something that we could talk about. And it didn't matter where we were from. It didn't matter who we were. It didn't matter how old we were or what sex we were--it became an environment that everyone could contribute to. We were able to

> get past that. But in a lot of the other classes, where you didn't have that kind of interaction between students, there was often a sense of isolation due to mistrust or lack of understanding.

These re-entry students appreciated it when the teacher took the lead in inviting people into the conversation or constraining overpowering voices. Good discussions required the establishment of an environment of discourse and discovery, where every voice had a place and every question was welcome.

In addition to classroom discussions, students spoke of collaborative learning settings as public opportunities for re-entry women students to demonstrate their commitment and understanding of material. While many interviewees expressed appreciation for the lessons in diversity and teamwork that group work endorsed, some women felt that collaborative learning strategies did not provide the best forum in which to demonstrate their abilities. In fact, some participants in this study merely tolerated structured group activities, and a few clearly did not like to work with others on class projects. They reported that frequently there would be an imbalance of effort, with half of the group coming prepared to work and the other half not even bothering to show up at the meeting. Others, like Letha, preferred to work independently, but voluntarily--albeit reluctantly--acknowledged the benefits of group work when asked to talk about her learning style preferences. Letha reported:

> I would rather do the lecture type. I'm not a very good participant when it comes to "Ok, we're gonna do a group thing!" I'd rather do my own thing. But most teachers did that. They'd group you, and you'd count off "one-two-three-four"; and the ones go here, and the twos go there. Most teachers

> did that. I kind of got used to it, but I never liked it. I guess I just didn't feel comfortable. But maybe I learned a lot from that, too, because you got everybody's opinion, not just yours. But I just never did like it.

Linda also had reservations about a class which seemed to fall into a rote pattern of instruction. The instructor utilized various teaching and learning strategies, but failed to capture the students in the assignments or purpose. Linda recalled:

> Of course, we had some teachers that did a lot of talking, and we had one teacher that would talk and we'd take notes, or we'd do a project in little groups. We had our project and we had to tell the group about it all around. Then, sometimes we'd come in, she'd talk a bit, then she'd hand out these papers where we'd get into little groups and work. It was psychology or something. I did not like the class, and nobody was thrilled with the teacher. She taught well, she just was kind of like a professional, I guess.

The observation "she taught well" seems oddly out of sync with the sentence it follows: "I did not like the class, and nobody was thrilled with the teacher." While the class offers variety-- opportunities for individual processing, group processing and oral reports--it did not meet this student's need to be actively involved in the course work. Clearly, "engaged in groups" does not always equal active learning, and the real educator is the teacher who can structure learning experiences so that the student not only interacts with the material, but comes to a broader and deeper understanding of it in the process.

Annie enjoyed the social aspect of her education, but expressed frustration with requests that she work in groups outside the classroom setting. She recalled:

> Two or more times we tried [small groups outside of class], but they fell apart every time. I came to the appointed time and place to get together, and sometimes I'd be the only one, or I'd bring my things and they wouldn't. You know, things would come up for them! Well, they came up for me, too. I was trying to juggle my aunt and other things. I may have been with the wrong groups. We did some work in classes, working in groups, and the groups changed often during the semester. I found that those worked better--when they brought the things to class and everybody was prepared for that session.

Several of the women interviewed changed their impressions of group work during the course of their studies. When asked if she liked to work in groups, Datoria announced:

> Now I do. Because you learn; you discuss with each other. Everyone is discussing their ideas--their own ideas on how to manipulate or go over or do this or do it that way. Not in the negative sense, but doing it the right way. Once you put all those ideas together, you're gonna come out with something big--something good. One finger can't do it all, but a big fist can, you know.

Diana also grew to understand the benefits of working in groups. She noted the role of teamwork and competition that comes into play with a group project:

> Most of the classes, they try to get some projects where you had to work in a group. At first I didn't like it, but then I did. I guess it all depends on who was in your group. If you have somebody that's slacking, it kinds of holds up your whole progress. But a good group is GREAT. Oh, we can get things

> done, and then it becomes competitive with the other groups. Is ours better? How are we gonna do this? We'd watch somebody else, and think of how we can improve.

Shirlene described a group experience that she found particularly stimulating. In the honors women's English class, she worked with six women in a group selected by the "count off" method of random assignment to illuminate a topic literally picked from a hat. When her group topic was "mystery," Shirlene noted:

> I about did handstands! Yes!! This is something that I like. I was afraid we were gonna get one of those topics that made you think! We were supposed to take the topic and do whatever--it was strictly up to us--but we had to make a presentation of ten or fifteen minutes before the class, and the main character had to be a women. Whether we did a skit, whether we did a debate type of thing, or whatever. Anyway, the six of us were sitting down in a conference room in the library--our think pot. So we sat in there and somebody said, "Why don't we do a skit?"

A mystery fan, Shirlene agreed to outline a brief skit, using Agatha Christie characters to form the action around a murder scene. Her main character--Jean Marble--solved the crime. She recalled:

> I put it all together, and I put the whole dialogue together and took it back to the next meeting we had, and everybody read it. All of a sudden their creative juices started flowing, and I didn't do anything else. The other five just took over. They prepared evidence; they prepared a diagram of the murder scene.

> Another girl who does some of the plays at MVCC got the props and wigs and that kind of stuff, and we rehearsed five or six times.
>
> That, for me, was a turning point, because it showed me, first of all, that I had a skill for turning people on; people who were at a higher level of schooling, intelligence, whatever you want to call it, than the average students. They really got into it. They took the ball and ran with it. I really like seeing people take the ball and run with it. I don't like carrying the ball all the time.

Learning to trust and to accept contributions of ideas and activities from others in order to enjoy a stronger end result was an important lesson for Shirlene. Although she might have involved them during the conceptualization stage and been more invested during the implementation stage, her willingness to turn the project over to the group was an important step in her personal development. Datoria also needed the group relationship to learn about herself and her interaction style. She noted:

> When I first did it [worked in a group] it was my last class at Majestic View Community College (MVCC). At first it was a bomb because I was so used to working alone and then showing other people how to do things. After the first couple weeks in class, the instructor pulled me to the side and said, "Datoria, you've got to get along; you gotta see this. You're gonna go through this in life, so learn from it. Don't be so aggressive." I was being aggressive. I was, "I don't want to do this. I want to work by myself." But you've got to learn from others, you know.

A third teaching/learning strategy that students expounded upon required them to move into the "teaching" role by either formally presenting ideas to their peers or working out problems at a white board. In these situations the students faced their fears and challenged their beliefs about the world or their own abilities. The most frequently occurring example is the required--and dreaded--speech class. Over and over, interviewees mentioned that public oration was against their nature, and attested that completing the speech requirement without too much embarrassment was a major confidence builder for them.

For MG, the challenge came in the course of a biology class, in which a creative teacher helped students learn by teaching others. She recalled:

> For the most part she'd do lectures, but every once in a while she'd shock people and do things like "chalk talk." She'd say, "Go up there and draw me mitosis and explain that." So we'd do that, or else we'd go up and show the class the model, compare and contrast an animal or a plant cell, or something. I liked that. I think it got me involved with what I was doing, but I also had to be able to explain to others what I understood. That's really difficult, and everybody's at a different point. And it's also a whole different perspective when you're up there and you're looking at your class, and they're like--[lost in space glare].

Dina recounted a similar experience in a math class:

> Here was an instructor that you really wanted to learn for; and he did something that no other instructor did--he made us work at the board in front of the classroom. I've never worked in front of the classroom except for that

> class. When we work in front of each other, we get the reduced sense of anxiety, we have to talk about what we're doing, we have to focus, we have to convey ideas and converse with others--really express what we're doing. Which is hard to do when you're talking about numbers or physics and stuff.

This was a strategy that Dina carried to her baccalaureate institution and introduced in study sessions or test-preparation groups.

For the re-entry student, moving out of the "front row" and into the expert's position provided an opportunity to encounter new ideas and reduce blind spots by challenging past perceptions. For Ad Lena, a career exploration class provided the new opportunity to step away from her goal-driven course work and examine issues with a fresh eye. She wasn't at a whiteboard, but she was clearly encouraged to consider, articulate, and share her ideas in a new way. Ad Lena recollected:

> [The career class] was *excellent*, I mean just *excellent*! I don't remember the teacher's name--she was young--and I don't remember her name but she did an excellent job of that, and that really helped me to confirm what I wanted to do. At the same time, I was so focused on getting this degree, that I didn't think about what else I could do. It never crossed my mind that I'm capable of doing something else, also. But what the career exploration class did for me was to challenge me to think about other things--other options. And then to talk about it, to write it out; I hadn't thought about it. I'm glad that I took that class because of the fact that I realized that I do have other options. There are other things--if I want to teach part-time and do something

else--these are the things you should be very good at doing. I remember saying, "You know, I never thought about that!"

The re-entry women in this study had made the commitment to securing their associate's degree, and their worlds rotated 45, 90, 180 degrees from where they started. When they talked about the process of change, they most ardently lauded their teachers and the activities that helped them to see themselves, their potential, and their areas of interest through a new lens. Working out problems out loud, with colleagues, or through visual displays challenged these women to "think about other things" in other ways. They certainly relished the challenge.

Out-of-Classroom Learning

The re-entry women students interviewed for this study spoke eloquently about the educational experiences they enjoyed in community college classrooms. Each assignment completed and each credit earned contributed to their sense of themselves as women of achievement, competence and worth. As vital as these classroom challenges were to their community college education, the women in this study also described out-of-classroom learning experiences that complemented the more formal instruction in important ways. This section will examine the significance that these women placed upon their involvement in college clubs and organizations, college work study jobs, and special support groups like the Options/Opportunities Program.

The women in this study focused considerable time and energy on the requirements for their classes, leaving little time for involvement in college clubs and organizations. However, the re-entry women students who elected to invest in non-classroom activities

often spoke highly of the opportunities to affiliate with other students and develop skills that were not directly broached in the formal classroom setting. As women, the student organizations provided a connection which was important to their sense of belonging and comfort. A good example of this affiliation is described by Dina, who, in addition to making the transition to a new city with a new job, established links to her college community through various avenues:

> You can't help but get a feeling for community at Grant Technical College. You know, you start to see the same faces up and down the escalator, on the elevator, in your classes. I got really close with my couple of instructors in the math department, and there was a woman teacher there who is Lebanese--and I'm half Lebanese--she's just such a scientist and so cool. Like an artist with her math. I found her very inspiring. And there was also Phi Theta Kappa, which is a really strong association on that campus.

Phi Theta Kappa--or PTK--is an honor society for two-year college students, a network of high achieving students working with a supportive system of advisors. PTK gave these women an identity and a place to be. MG recalled, "They [PTK] have a scholarship luncheon every semester, and I was invited to that. I went to the luncheon and I listened to their spiel and I went on with my life." However, a fellow student invited her to the office one day and she went. "I was welcomed in and I took that to heart. Grant Technical College (GTC) is a nice small school, but there's really not a lot of places for people to congregate, and PTK has its own office. One of the nice things about it at that time was they had a coffee machine! A place to put a coat and a coffee machine!"

Dina described the activity of the PTK office more fully:

> Students coming and going and eating their food in there and talking on the phone and high drama. . .a lot of high drama! I'm not a big high drama person, but there was a lot of "You know what this person said?" and "Do you believe what happened?" And a lot of emotion, but a lot of beautiful feelings and a lot of happiness if you were doing well; and sometimes certain amounts of frustration. But people supporting each other. Very supportive. Of course, when you have people that closely knit in that tiny of a room, you're bound to have some bad feelings about some things; but that just goes to show how much of a family we were--otherwise you can just go around ignoring each other.

Key to this tight knit group was Professor H., one of the PTK advisors. He was described as a friend, a support, a mentor, and a critic. Dina recalled him as:

> One of those people who makes everybody believe they're special. He would walk into the office door and say, "God, you look beautiful!" and you would be. He'd say, "You're going somewhere and you're doing good." He just didn't put up with negative thoughts--especially self-doubt. He tried to put that away right away.

Gayl recalled a slightly different side to Professor H. when she noted:

> Professor H. and I developed a relationship where the two of us could sit down and talk about anything. We could talk about things that were going on at home; we became prayer partners. I'd come in because there was

> something--my husband is ill, and I'd have to come in--and I'd talk to the Professor early in the morning before anyone else got there and the two of us would talk about it, and I'd ask him to keep me in his prayers. Professor H. and I just got to where we could look at each other without even saying anything and know it was time to talk.

For Gayl, Professor H.'s care and concern were mirrored in the Phi Theta Kappans who became her friends despite their ability to intimidate her. When probed to describe her time at GTC, Gayl shared:

> I got very involved in Phi Theta Kappa--it was probably the most nurturing experience of my life because it brought me from a place where I didn't feel like I really fit in and I felt kind of "odd man out," you know, the "old lady in the bunch." And would they talk around me, like they didn't want me to hear something? I didn't know how to feel. And, also knowing that I have a learning disability, I was worried about whether I would feel stupid around them or what was gonna happen when they "really find out about me?"

When asked if the "them" in her description referred to other students, Gayl said:

> Yeah, and the people in PTK--especially them! These are the guys that had GPAs that were like 3.0 and above! Some of these guys walk around with 4.0s! I had a 4.0 [GPA] at the time, too, but it didn't make any difference to me. Somehow they would find out the truth about me!! And that is what I got from Phi Theta Kappa. Not only did I have the chance to study with people and help them, I was able to help people who were having difficulty

> understanding something in humanities or English. And there were people there who were able to help me if I was having difficulty in math. It worked out really well that way. It was a good exchange between all of us, and a sense of family. It was just that kind of supportive atmosphere there.

Just as PTK helped Gayl find a community of support that built her confidence, MG benefitted from her experiences with PTK. She reminisced:

> I was really lucky I joined a group called Phi Theta Kappa. It got to a point where I needed to get involved with people again. When I first went [to GTC] I had to prove to myself that I could do the academics. I did that and was comfortable with that. PTK was an honor society, so you have to have the grades to get in anyway. But it was a lot of service to the community, service to school; and I had done a lot of service with my son's school, so I was ready to get involved. I had two really good years with PTK. I got more involved with school. I got more involved with people. I got more comfortable with people. And that was really important to me, because I tend to be a loner.

MG identified this need to be "more comfortable with people" as a real challenge during her years at GTC, and one which PTK helped her address. She recalled the challenge:

> I really think being comfortable with people--putting myself into a situation where I feel like I'm accepted by people. I'm not someone who can go up and say, "I hear you're going . . .blah, blah. . .can I join you?" Because I don't like to intrude. And so, I had to learn that it's not always that you're

> intruding. I think that "rejection thing"--I really think that was the most difficult for me. And so that's part of why I'm a loner, and yet, I can still talk to people. Being part of PTK, particularly being Chapter Photographer, did wonders for me. If I wanted a shot I had to get into the people. And I purposely took that challenge and a camera in my hand will get me into a lot of doors.

MG's comfort with other people eventually reached a level where she became vice-president of PTK in her last year at Grant Technical College. She reported:

> As vice president you coordinate and deal with all the chairs--we had seven--you make sure they're doing what they need to do and keep them on task. We have an honor's topic we work on every year, so I had to make sure that we were doing the activities to cover the honors topic. Basically, you do whatever needs doing!

MG was nominated by Professor H. and received several awards and scholarships for her service, academic excellence, student leadership. She also was named class valedictorian and spoke at her graduation. This was quite a change from a "totally silent person who would just sit and work on the book exchange and that kind of stuff" to a woman who was asked to be a keynote speaker at a Women's History Month event because, as her advisor told her, "you've gotten so involved in PTK, you've become a viable force in the classroom as well as in the school community, and we think you're a really good model for people."

Was Phi Theta Kappa the sole aspect of MG's experience at Grant Technical College that was responsible for this change? Probably not. But it was, by her own report, a

enormously important factor. She noted:

> PTK was very challenging, but it got me involved in things. Because I am more quiet, I actually enjoyed working with people and getting involved with groups. That was probably one of the better things that happened to me. Because it was beyond academics; because it was seeing that there's more to life than just studying. Even though I knew that, I didn't always know how to go about it. And I think that was one of the best things for me.

This broadening of perceptions in a supportive environment was powerful for MG. She further described her PTK experience as:

> Being a part of something. And it's not just doing something all the time, but being part of a nucleus--and literally part of them--not just someone out there looking in. And that did an incredible amount for me. It opened up a lot of doors. Part of being in PTK is not just the stuff at school. They do national conventions, they do an honors institute every summer which we had to write an essay to go--it was a scholarship--and I won the scholarship two years in a row. So for me it was incredible. It was like $750.00 for a week, and you're part of more people than PTK. You meet on a whole new level. But PTK also likes to have fun! So it was also nice to really feel like I was part of that group. I was one of them and not just someone standing on the side. And I needed that really badly.

While PTK provided a powerful point of connection and affirmation for some of the students in this study, college work-study positions or affiliations with special support

programs like the Options/Opportunities program provided similar linking experiences for other students. Caitlynn, for instance, identified her campus job as one of the most vivid memories of her community college years. She shared:

> I knew everybody because I worked in the office that registered the students and counseled the students, and they got their grades--the good and the bad. If it happened anywhere, it happened right in that office. You saw the nice sides of the students, and you saw the bad side. [aside] "You know, we can't help it if you signed up and paid for a four credit hour course and your parents paid for it and you decided not to go to it and didn't drop." You have deadlines when you can drop out for a refund, and a lot of these students would wait until after the date. We had posters as big as this building all over campus when it's time to withdraw for cash . . .you saw the good side and the bad side. Working in there, no classroom experience--I mean there were--but none were as good, or as bad, as working in that office.

Bonnie also recalled her hours as receptionist in the Options/Opportunities office as memorable. Working on campus, she became linked to the academic community more strongly than if she had arrived in time for classes and returned home upon their completion. Bonnie especially remembered:

> The holiday festivities going on in each department, where people bring in food and this or that, and we'd wander to see who's got the best stuff. Work employees on their birthdays, people who were going away, I remember going away parties when so and so retired or someone was moving to a new

job--that sticks in your mind. I think that if I didn't have the opportunity to work in the office itself--and not just being a strict student--it probably wouldn't mean a heck of beans.

This link not only allowed her to celebrate with college staff, but it put her in a position where her personal efforts could be recognized and applauded. Bonnie was invited to attend the "Women's Work" program sponsored by the Options/Opportunities Program for which she worked. She recalled:

> I was invited to attend this conference, and I said, "Oh, ok," and didn't think much of it. There we were. We spent all day going to these seminars, meeting, conversing [on issues like] communication, working, working women in every aspect of their lives. Then, they threw a real curve on me. Towards the evening, Penny Severns showed up, and I didn't think anything about it. I was totally flabbergasted. To this day it's hard. There was a lot of emotion there for me. I won an award. They gave me a clock that sits on your desk. It's got "Women's Work Achievement Award" on it. They knew I was having trouble with speech class--K.C. knew for sure because I had talked to her about it--and, actually, I had to get up and give a speech! I thought, "Oh my God, what do I say?" I didn't think anything of the program, it was the first time I had ever been to one of these types of conferences. Yes, that was one of my highlights right there. I never would have dreamt that [I'd get an award and give a speech], as far as I could see, anyway. It's something I'll never, ever forget either. I was all uppity! I had never been so up high in

the air. I kept saying, "You're going to get it!" (laughter)

Imagine the sense of value and worth that Bonnie developed that evening and carried into her workplace the following day. Her "highlight" challenged her to face her fear of public speaking--a class she had delayed until her final semester; challenged her to think of her academic goals as something more noble than an effort to get off of public aid; and challenged her to accept the fact that she was held in esteem by the people who worked so hard to keep this award a surprise.

This chapter has examined the commitment that the re-entry women in this study made to learning, the caring faculty who guided their efforts, and the various teaching/learning interactions that occurred both in and outside the classrooms that "made a difference" in these women's community college experience. A final section will investigate two aspects of the college experience that served as "benchmarks" for these women--guideposts that helped them evaluate their own success through comparisons with the achievements and behaviors of others.

## Benchmarks

All of the re-entry women in this study spoke positively about their community colleges, including the academic programs, faculty, and institutional cultures that supported their success. The women challenged themselves to move beyond the perceptions of themselves developed in grade school or high school, and, guided by a caring faculty, demonstrated their competence, knowledge and abilities. These determined women worked hard for their grades, relying upon their faculty to structure and evaluate the learning experience and upon themselves to devote the time and energy necessary to master a subject

area or skill. Some of these teaching and learning experiences were more successful than others. Some of the classes were more challenging than others. And some were not. Ultimately, however, classes became a forum for creative affirmation and grades became a symbol of success or failure.

It would be ideal if each grade for each student stood on its own merit. However, given the communal nature of American education, there is a relativity in the grading system which depends at times upon the quality of one student's work, behavior, or attitudes in comparison with other students' work, behavior, or attitudes. Thus, these women students considered and evaluated their performance as judged by the instructor through grades, and viewed their abilities in relation to their evaluation of other--often younger--students. Student colleagues gave these re-entry women a point of reference by which they would at times determine if they were meeting the standards of the academy or falling short. Their perceptions of their colleagues--or competition (as the case may be)--reflected their own evaluation of themselves as they were in their early twenties, and as they saw themselves as more mature individuals today. The benchmarks used by these women to evaluate their performance through earned grades and comparisons with other students are examined next. These discussions of the meaning of grades and observations regarding fellow students provide a rich context for understanding how these re-entry women students evaluated their community college experiences.

Making The Grade

Because they often made significant adjustments in their lives to be successful students, feedback--especially in the form of good grades--was very important to this group

of re-entry women. For the most part, they were very successful in their classes, with a number of women earning honors each semester. The combination of high expectations and often unexpected success led several women to mention the trauma of receiving their first B or C grade. In the examples, they shared their distress over a less than perfect score was subjectively weighted and, by objective standards, did not justify the sense of failure and doom that the score elicited. Shirlene remembered her strong reaction to receiving:

> My first B on a test. I came out here and sat in the lunchroom and cried for ten minutes. In fact, I thought I had failed the test. I knew that I had not done as well on the test as I wanted to. I missed an A by one point. I still had the highest grade in the class. But it didn't feel that good to me just simply because I knew I had not done the job I should do . . . in my mind, it wasn't up to par.

For Shirlene, the highest score in the class--just short of an above average grade--was not enough! Without waiting for the outcome of her test, she was reduced to tears and evaluated herself as a complete failure. Obviously, Shirlene placed great value on the grades she received in her classes at MVCC.

Meanwhile, at GTC, Gayl reported a similar devastation when her performance did not meet her standards:

> I remember one time I was sitting in the office and two of the students were sitting there with me. They were getting ready to graduate that year, and I was *devastated.* I had just gotten a C on a mid-term, and it was the midterm given by one of the three advisors of Phi Theta Kappa--and I was just

> devastated. I didn't know what I was gonna do! I was just totally distraught. And this girl looked at me, and she got up and she shook my hand firmly and she said, "Congratulations!" I said, "What?!?!"And she said, "Now you don't have to worry about that first C anymore! Get over it!"

Rather than seeing a mid-term grade as a point of feedback and a challenge to re-evaluate and adjust, Gayl physically and mentally reflected her disappointment in the grade. Beyond that, she moved from her own dismay to embarrassment in not meeting the assumed expectations of an instructor she respected. Fortunately for Gayl, a colleague helped her put her score in perspective, quickly assuring her that a C grade was not the end of the world!

Renee told a story about her first experience with accounting at WBCC, "I didn't do well, and I just did not accept that (laughter)! That was not acceptable! *I don't get Ds!* I was mad!" Probed to elaborate, Renee added:

> I just can't accept feeling like I didn't do well, and maybe there's more I could have done. That's what those Ds meant to me. If they had meant that the class was just really hard, I could have maybe accepted that. But I just never felt like it. There's really nothing that if I put the effort into it, I couldn't learn. So that means that if I got a D, I didn't put the effort into it.

Renee was a bit more realistic in her interpretation of her D grade. She had passed, but with additional effort she could have done better.

Ad Lena's high standards caused her disappointment when she realized that she couldn't do it all perfectly:

> Because, I'm telling you, I was devastated! "Oh, my God! I got a B! How

> am I going to live with this?! This is horrible!!!" I felt awful . . . awful! As a child, my mother would say, "Why are you doing this? It's ok." But, no, it wasn't ok. But that was me. It wasn't that my mother required a good grade. She was a teacher, and she wanted us to do well, but she didn't want all As from everybody.

Ad Lena found a faculty mentor who helped her adjust her attitude to a more realistic level. She recalled, "I got a few Bs, I admit it. I actually survived it, and that was a major deal for me. It really was. [It was important] to reconcile myself; really, really having someone there to help me reconcile receiving that B." Her professor helped her develop a plan that put her in control:

> And his way of doing that was to say to me, "Ok, you're taking two classes. Just decide which one you're going to make the B in and which one you'll make an A in. You decide." I said, "Ok."
>
> He said, "Try that. Don't try to make As in both. You get too frustrated. What I want you to do is just try. All I'm asking is that you try. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Don't drive yourself crazy."
>
> I tried it, and it worked. I said, " Ok, this doesn't feel bad. It doesn't hurt. I'm not going to feel bad." And I would say, "I got a B." But you know, that A is so nice. That was a premiere occasion! That was a milestone. I have not been, before that, willing to reconcile myself to getting a B in anything.

Asked to elaborate on the meaning of a B grade, Ad Lena continued:

> To me, it meant that I didn't do my best. That's what it meant. I know that I'm capable of A work, and, as far as I was concerned, there's no reason why I shouldn't walk into the classroom the first day with an A and walk out the last day with an A. I learned that it's ok if I don't get it. That was a big deal for me; for a lot of people it's not. They would be thrilled with a B. But, I guess I'm driven in a lot of ways.

Mary C. felt that the desire for high grades could be attributed to age:

> Older students do want to get a good grade. We're not wasting our money, our time, or our energy getting a stinking C or D in class. We're gonna do it. I want a B or an A. If I'm gonna work hard at it, that's what I want. I did not want to be wasting my time and not get a good grade or not learn!

Diana shared the concern expressed by others about maintaining good grades. She claimed, "It's so depressing to get a C. Because it's so easy to slip from a C to a D. With a B you have like a little chance, but you'd rather stay on top of everything. As are important; Bs are acceptable." For Diana, a good grade represented breathing room rather than worth. This is because, she observed: "When I first went in [to GTC], like I said, I went in with the thought I'd just get this piece of paper, this certificate, and then try to get a job." Diana saw college as a means to an end, and was able to be realistic in her evaluation of the grades she received.

Lee shared a slightly different perspective, placing the grade as the goal. She noted:

> I always kept it [my class papers] until I got the final grade. Then I could go in and fight. And, I have fought for my As. I'll never forget, I was taking this

> statistics class, and I had an 89.4, and I was like, "You know me, I was there every day, and I was always prepared, come on!!" And, he gave me the A, really an A-, but I took it! A dirty A!

Clean or dirty, Lee's grades exceeded her expectations when she entered WBCC. She had hoped to be an average student when she entered the community college, feeling that for several reasons, she might not be competitive with her fellow students. She shared her early internal ruminations:

> Man, I'm going to be in competition with all of these people coming out of high school. It's been years since I've really been in an educational setting. There is just no way that I'm going to be able to compete with those people, and I'm going to have to do a lot of catching up. And, I've been with my math, I mean, I have to go and start basic algebra and work my way back through it; but it really bothered me because I thought there was no way I was [going to do it]. I thought, boy, if I could just pull Cs it would be okay. It was very intimidating. But then, I picked up real quick. I could compete. I could get the grades. And I said, "These kids don't have a clue about these professors! It's so easy, guys!" You sit at the front of the class--right in the center row--because I knew of kids that were sitting in the back--the very back--and I just couldn't figure that one out. And they could not stand to be called on!

Realizing her advantage, Lee easily competed for her associate's degree and then went on to complete a bachelor's program.

The fact that the re-entry women who were interviewed for this study were community college graduates is a testament to their success. They made the grade. While many were honors students, others admitted to being B or C students. Sometimes the "not-quite-perfect" grades did not fully represent the total learning that the student took away from a class, as she learned about herself, her limits, and her abilities. As the next section indicates, other students often helped to explicate this self-knowledge.

Other Students

Student colleagues shared faculty time and attention, participated in the learning process, and provided a point of comparison for the women in this study. As re-entry students, these women recognized that their numbers alone did not guarantee their place in a college community which had historically catered to the 18-22 year olds transitioning from their parents' homes to more independent lifestyles. While these re-entry women also were involved in a major life transition, they often focused their comparisons upon the differences-- rather the similarities--that existed between them and their peers. As much as they wanted to be a part of the academic community, they reveled somewhat in the maturity, circumstances, and responsibilities that set them apart from most of their younger classmates.

To a person, the re-entry women interviewed indicated that their college relationships developed primarily with students enrolled in the same field of endeavor and often were based upon common academic challenges. Some women spoke highly of the camaraderie enjoyed with other students in their classes. When asked to describe the best thing about her experience at WBCC, for instance, Lee was quick to respond:

Just bonding with the other students. Just that wonderful little support group

that you always fall into when you have a rotten professor. You walk out together and say, "Oh my God, do you believe what he did! I don't believe this class!" I think it's that: when you come out of a class and you're talking about something and you're sitting down with the other students--that is so important--to know that you're not alone in that journey, but there is support there if you need to vent or talk or something. And it's usually with the other students that are going through a particular class. If they're in my age group, or the older returning students, you kind of bond and immediately form a little group.

It was nice that in several classes I met really good friends that lasted for a semester or two as we went through the class. Then, they would go off and I'd go to another class. But it was so important when it was happening, that you could call somebody and say, " Oh, man, I missed class today." I remember in my business class this one woman--she was an older returning woman also--she broke her leg and she couldn't make three classes. She asked me to record all the classes for her, which I did. Then she had me and my husband over for a big Italian dinner. Things like that were really nice.

While relationships easily developed with classmates of similar ages, these re-entry women had various impressions of the traditionally aged students in their classes. Bonnie captured the mixed feelings with her observation, "it was almost an inferiority complex but yet a superiority complex at the same time. Inferior because you're older than the rest of your classmates, and yet, because of life, I am 'older,' I know, too. It was a mix." Simply

put, maturity was both a positive and a negative for these re-entry students.

In many cases, the re-entry women were intimidated by the younger student's brainpower. Letha asserted, "they retain everything better than you do, anyway, and they're younger. Some of those kids didn't even come to school half the time and they passed the class. So you know they're smart! (laughter)" Aja agreed, noting that as a re-entry student she found herself "working that much harder to get what you took for granted when you're younger. They catch on so fast! I would like someone to go over it a couple of times and maybe even review; so that it's that feeling like I'm slower."

Ease of remembering was a perceived difference between the younger and re-entry student, as was a greater comfort with technology. Mary C. recounted:

> The young people with computers and calculators, they run circles around you. They would be difficult to get answers out of--they would just look at you blank. They didn't understand what it is that you didn't understand. So salvation came in the form of an older student who figured it out.

Of course, many of these students had not been in a classroom in twenty or twenty-five years, and found changes in familiar subjects like mathematics and history that were not such a surprise to recent high school graduates. Another change was in perspective. For instance, Mary C. spoke of an American history class where she "was older than the teacher. Then he got to 1955, and he said, 'How was it, Mrs. C.?' Oh God, pretty awful! (laughter) But I actually found that it was pretty fascinating, too."

While early experiences with more traditionally aged students were sometimes intimidating, they could also be irritating. Most of the women commented on the young,

giggling students who were just "marking time." Slang, profanity, and lack of preparation for classes demonstrated the immaturity that some of the traditionally aged students displayed. Gayl made the following observations about younger students at GTC:

> The ones that are fresh out of high school, frequently, have not had work experiences or responsibilities other than taking courses and studying for tests, and maybe working to pay off their car insurance (laughs). And, here I've been raising children, being a single parent, then getting married and having to try to make ends meet while living with real world experiences. And I think that in some way sets me apart from them, because I don't have the same frame of reference that they do. And for me, it's something that I feel a lot more focused in my education---I take it a lot more seriously than they do. For a lot of them it's just marking time until they get to the end of the semester, and they get to the end of the term and they get their degree, and they get out of here. They've been in school--solidly--since kindergarten. For me, I've had a long break. I'm in here and I want to get it done. I want to get it over with. I want to get down to business and get out of here and go teach.

Robin took a slightly different slant on the situation when she noted: "At 18, I don't think I'd have graduated. Maybe just because watching the kids here; maybe I'm so old, I think, 'Don't you ever go to school?'"

Often, re-entry women became mentors, offering suggestions on how to improve grades or involving younger students in study groups. More than half of the women described

a motherly, or grand-motherly, role that they assumed with the younger students. Mary C. observed:

> Younger students automatically thought you were a genius if you were old. They'd ask me questions all the time. I found myself being very motherly towards them. "You know honey, if you would just do your homework. I have to do my homework. There's no way I can come to this class without having it done. If you would just do your homework, I'd bet you'd do well, too."

Lee also described her nurturing role with younger students:

> I wasn't that involved with some of the younger students, but some of them I was. It was really amazing, some of the bonds that you would form there. Mainly helping them through homework assignments, and, probably, just someone to talk to when they didn't do well on a test. Sitting down and going through that with them. If they would get a D or a C , they would say, "Yeah, this is terrible! I didn't do very well!" And I would counter, "Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. That's how he grades; he grades on a curve and that's how come I did so well. But look, here's what you did wrong. You can do this!

She provided support, guidance and motherly love for these younger students.

Several students reported that they had difficulty finding their niche with their classmates--they appeared too young to be re-entry women, but they were single parents with all of the responsibilities that status entails. Renee reported:

> I was kind of in the middle. Because I had women [in my classes] that were

> late 30s-early 40s, and then I had kids right out of high school, 17-18 year olds. I had children. I was not thinking about the next party. Then I wasn't thinking about my mortgage and my retirement, either! So I was kind of in the middle until I found a group of women that are maybe living the life that you're living or they can understand the life that you're living.

Datoria solved her similar dilemma by forming two groups of friendships. When asked if she interacted mostly with older students or younger students, she responded, "Younger with the help. Older I hung around to get knowledge. I would hang around them to get knowledge, and then when younger students came I was able to share it."

Although issues of program, race, and gender were probed, the variable that was most often reported as a distinguishing characteristic for this group of graduates was age. Sometimes it was with relief, as in the case of Dina, who boasted, "I didn't care if I appeared foolish, or like I didn't know. I was paying for my education." Lee, too, spoke with relief of her ability to dive into her studies unencumbered, realizing that "I don't have to find a date for Saturday night, and I don't care how my hair looks!"

> Other women gravitated toward the younger students, Caitlynn commented: Most of the time I got along with the younger ones better than, I think, the older ones. I think because the younger ones, in most situations that I can recall, weren't as jaded. They were mostly laid back. There's a time to be serious, and there's a time to joke around. A lot of times they were just nicer to be around.

> Annie, with her years of experience, had a fresh perspective. She reported:

> There's a different life and environment in the day school, and I think it's because it is mostly young people coming in--with fresh ideas and fresh questions. I think it was a big advantage to me to hear that sort of thing instead of where I am--I mean, I wouldn't have wanted to be in a class where everyone was within ten years of me in either direction! I really felt this was a wonderful opportunity for someone my age to be around them. By the same token, in many ways, I think that I was the first person my age that they had the kind of relationship that they did.

Annie continued:

> I learned that today's young people have a lot to them. There were times I'd walk down the hall--you know, sometimes you feel like you're wading through hormones in those halls (laughter)--but the feeling grew on me that I'm walking here and spending my life with people who are the future. Out of these halls will come future school board members, or state representatives, or national or even world representatives of some type. And a lot of them are working very hard. A lot of them are just goofing off, but most of them are not. And it was important for me not to judge harshly.

In developing relationships with other, younger students, the women who were interviewed were able to identify their own place in the scheme of things. They often enjoyed the comfortable, mothering role they adopted. They were pleased to not be involved with the dating and mating rituals of youth. They recognized that their strong work ethic and prior training served them in good stead in the college arena. Shirlene, who took real offense

at the term "non-traditional student," explained:

> Community colleges call us the non-traditional student, and we're not. We are the traditional students, and I believe that the high school students are non-traditional. There are fewer of them at the high school age--kids fresh out of high school--there are fewer of them than us. So I definitely felt like I was the majority, and that gives you a little extra step. And then the kids that are coming in straight out of high school today--most of them are not near my level of skill in math and English. Most of them are going into the [basic classes]. It's basic. It's stuff that I learned when I was in grade school.

Lee also took offense at the term non-traditional, but elected to define the concept more broadly. Picking up on the interviewer's language, she asserted:

> You said, "non-traditional student." I just hate that term. It has nothing to do with age or gender. It has to do with personality and ambition, and what you really want out of a college. The fact that I was older had little to do with it, because I was with students that were much younger, but they were focused and they knew what they wanted. And they could sit with me and we would get good grades together. I had traditional and non-traditional students that I wanted to choke; that I wanted to kick. And they couldn't understand why they were getting a C; and they had come to class twice! I thought that was pretty good! And I don't think it has anything to do with age or gender. I think it has to do with personality. If you had taken my personality and put it into another gender or another age, you probably would have gotten the

same results.

Perhaps Lee was right. However, it is likely that another age or gender would have yielded very different perspectives on education, ambition, and ability.

Grades and comparisons to their fellow students were important benchmarks for the re-entry women students in this study. Grades not only provided feedback on how they were doing in their classes, grades were proof to them and to the world that their hard work was worth the effort and sacrifices they were making. Comparisons with other students showed that they could balance their perceived deficits with other strengths. For instance, it might be harder to learn because their physical and mental selves were older, but they were more willing to put in the work than other students around them and often worked "smarter" because they could figure out what they needed to do to succeed. They may have had children and homes to care for, but--as at least two participants mentioned--they didn't spend a lot of time worrying whether they had a date Saturday night or were impressing the softball player in the next seat. At their unique junctures, the women in this study had to attend to different worries.

The themes highlighted in this chapter address those individual and institutional issues that enhance the success of re-entry women students in community colleges. The women interviewed mentioned the importance of supportive faculty and family members when they faced stresses created by the demands of their new academic challenges, their often unusually high standards for success, and their own fears and insecurities. They told stories of an incredible determination to move forward despite inept or uncaring faculty and countless potential set-backs. They spoke of the importance of on-campus liaisons through

work-study or organized student groups, and the critical roles of child care, tutoring and financial support.

The women in this study also spoke of the importance of feedback and guidance as they struggled to succeed in an unfamiliar--and often intimidating--college setting. In the absence of other forms of feedback, grades became exceptionally significant. However, the re-entry women also spoke of the affirming value of meaningful interactions with faculty and counselors; specific observations of performance that challenged the "old tapes" they carried with them; and direct or indirect reassurance that they could compete academically and socially with the other students in their classes and organizations. They spoke of needing the tools to be successful students--clear syllabi, clear expectations, and directions on everything from finding classrooms, organizing courses, and filing for graduation.

Through their college experiences, these women learned to challenge authority, think of themselves as people of worth, and reveal a maturity, potential and pride that had previously eluded them. In short, these women found their voices while engaging in academic pursuits and out-of classroom endeavors that allowed them to recognize the true extent of their abilities and the caliber of their daily accomplishments.

The next chapter will examine the value that these women placed upon their community college experience as indicated by self-reported changes in behavior and attitude, testimonials to other potential students, situations in which they served as role models, and their evaluations of the outcomes of their community college experiences. In addition, ways in which their experiences may be of value to higher education professionals and other re-entry college students will be addressed, as will recommendations for further research.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE: FOR THE INDIVIDUAL, FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The re-entry women graduates interviewed for this study furnished rich descriptions of their community college experiences. From various beginnings, they took disparate paths to the doors of their respective colleges and pursued unique journeys that eventually led each of them to a college degree. Most of these women entered their community college with fears and trepidations developed as the result of past attempts and failures in educational settings. Many of them compensated for their concerns about their ability to succeed and fit in by plodding through the work class by class, course by course. Several were buoyed by the anticipation and excitement of fulfilling a dream. Each woman paid a price as she struggled with intellectual, economic, and emotional pressures while engaged in her studies and enjoyed varying levels of understanding and support from family and friends. Then--whether it had taken them two years or fifteen years--they were invited to graduation to receive their degrees. They had, indeed, succeeded!

This study examined the community college experience of eighteen re-entry women graduates, identifying the key roles that faculty, learning experiences both in-and-outside of class, grades and fellow students played in helping these women attain their degrees, develop a sense of self, secure a place in the workforce, or pursue further higher education.

Previous chapters have attempted to sketch these issues using the words and experiences of the women who so graciously participated in this study.

This chapter is devoted, in large part, to issues of value. Addressed first are themes which explicate graduates' perceptions of the value derived from their community college experiences. Primary to this discussion are the intangible rewards the community colleges provided students as they developed tools for future success and confidence. Other themes include the valuable testimonials provided by these re-entry students regarding their experience and their influence on others to consider returning to college, graduates' feelings about their community college degrees, and the very real outcomes of their college success as measured by self-reports on the worth and effectiveness of their post-secondary education.

After the value of the experience to these individuals is examined, two separate sections on recommendations follow. In the first, recommendations regarding the value of what has been learned from these women and how these insights may benefit higher education professionals and re-entry students are explored. In the second section, recommendations for future research are discussed.

## Value to the Individual

Despite the fact that seven of the eighteen women interviewed considered dropping out of their community college programs at some point, when directly asked, "Was it worth it?" each of the eighteen women responded resoundingly: "Yes!" Their doubts arose when money was low, when they had problems at home, or when guilt bothered them--like MG, who considered dropping when "I thought I should go out to work and have a life."

What then, was the value of the community college experience? For these women, the potential for additional income was a strong incentive for sticking it out. Diana shared her thinking at a juncture when money was tight when she reflected, "At that point I realized that I could still get the money or even more with a degree. I looked more long term. I wasn't starving or anything-- if I had been starving I would probably have had to make another choice, but there was sufficient [money]."

Others, like Bonnie and Gayl, had a strong cheering section who would not let them act on their periodic wish to end their studies. Bonnie's turning point came at the very end of her course work. She recalled:

> The next to the last semester. I said, "I'm going somewhere warm. I'm going to go to work. I'm sick of studying and I don't want to study no more!" (laughter) My daughter made a suggestion one day when I told her about my thinking I'd just go back to work. She said, "But mom, look how far you've come!" That got me a little there, and then I mentioned something to my mom, [who said, ] "Well, you'll be stupid if you do it now!" (Laughter) She just let me have it!

Most of these re-entry women, however, never gave themselves the option to consider abandoning what they had started. They had children depending on them, or they had made great sacrifices to be in school--including living in public housing or quitting a lucrative job. Most, like Linda, were determined to see it through. As she shared: "I set out to get a job, and in order to at least help get a job, the degree was important. So I just chugged on down the road." The path led them to places they never dreamed they'd see.

From Intimidated to Empowered

In many ways, these re-entry women students got much more than they had ever imagined. To a person, they described dramatic changes that they observed in themselves from the time that they first enrolled at their community colleges until they were awarded their degrees. They often related the sense of personal transformation, as they developed confidence in themselves, began to question others, and became aware that they could be somebody who would make a difference.

Early descriptions that the re-entry women assigned to themselves were sometimes rather morose. Annie recalled her frame of mind when she registered at WBCC for her first college class--at the age of 69:

> I was kind of sad. I was kind of down on myself. I felt that I wasn't going anywhere, and I didn't have forever to go somewhere. If I was going somewhere, I had to get on the train pretty quick. And I was questioning whether or not I could do this--or if I could do any of my classes.

Annie got past her fears, however, and continued:

> But then I told myself, this is different than being in school at a different time in my life--nobody has a report card that has to be signed. I'm responsible for myself, and this isn't quite the same. And, you know, in time, I had it all turned around. I wanted to work hard and get grades--just as I did in high school-- my attitude was just the same even at that time when I didn't know I was going to get a degree. It was about two years into classes when I

> realized that I was getting good grades! And the hours were counting up! As time went by, I felt more comfortable within myself. Each course added a little more to me. I didn't feel as down. I wasn't as hard on myself. By the time I graduated I just felt so good to be able to tell me that I had completed two years of college--that I knew that much--but I still wanted to learn more. And, when I realized that I was on my way--that I had those two years and I did just great-- I realized that I wanted some more.

It is significant that Annie said, "By the time I graduated I just felt so good to be able to tell *me* that I had completed two years of college." She had moved from being her own worst critic to being her own biggest fan and source of approval.

Like Annie, MG described a "quiet desperation" when she commented on her early days at GTC:

> I was very quiet. Even though I wanted to go to school, and I wanted a degree, I had no idea what I wanted. I was ready. I was ready for the challenge. I was happy to be there, but I kept to myself. And that was probably the case for three years. I'd go to class, I'd do my stuff, and I was still helping with my son's school when I first started, so I was there when I wasn't at my school. It's taken me a very long time to think that what I have to offer someone else would want. I never used to believe that. I really never felt that I was skilled. I've always been very creative -- I can sew and I can do a lot of stuff --but I always felt that other people would not want that; that it was not important as a professional. They want someone who can type, or

they want someone who knows . . . whatever.

Although she ended up being the valedictorian of her graduating class, MG's early sense of not having anything to offer was mirrored by a number of these re-entry women students as they enrolled in classes. Low self esteem took various forms. Gayl described her fear in the following way:

> When I first came to GTC, as I first said, I wasn't sure that I was capable of doing anything other than maybe sit in the classroom occupying a seat. I wasn't sure that I would be able to get in an assignment on time; that I would be able to understand what the assignment was; that I'd be able to do the reading. I was just very intimidated by my own lack of self confidence.

Aja hid her low self-esteem behind a certain arrogance during her early years at GTC. By her own account, she started out:

> As a know-it-all, probably. I probably thought "I'm just taking this for the heck of it." Because they would ask us, "What are you taking this for?" And I had no intention of getting my degree from there. I was like, "I'm just taking a couple of courses to move on." And that's what I thought I would do. So I was a lot more immature then, and I guess maybe I thought I didn't need any help, either. I knew pretty much what they were gonna tell me, so I didn't have to go find anybody.

Aja took twelve years to complete her community college degree, spending several years taking courses without direction or purpose. She then realized that:

> Once I started to realize that I wanted to be a doctor, and I was researching

> and reading on it, and I noticed I didn't know anything about the process. I knew you take this many classes; you get your degree; you apply to med school; you take the MCAT. That's all I knew. And, once I decided this time, I started to do research and read up on medicine, and I found out that you need to do volunteer work, you need recommendations. There's so much that they want you to do!

When asked how she'd changed, Aja stated: "I guess now I'm a little bit more mature and I want to know what I need to do and I want to be prepared." This was surely a useful lesson as she completed her first semester as a junior level pre-med student at a prestigious university.

Diana also learned to stop and take stock of herself and her needs while she attended GTC. At 57 years of age, Diana observed:

> Oh yes, I did definitely change. Because when I first started at GTC, remember, I only started there to get just some sort of paper so that I could change careers--go into another direction--never really intending to get a degree. And then once I started, [I thought] "This is important." It forced me to take a look at *everything*.

Diana continued her thoughts:

> Have you ever taken a survey and somebody asks you a question about something that you never thought about before? And then you have to stop and really think about it, and then sometimes you have to think about it again. "What do I really think about this?" Not just give some flip answer, but *really*

> think about it. Sometimes, I have to do that. I think, "Where am I going with this now?" And try to stay on top of it. Especially with my age. I have to stay on target.

Having a "target" was something new for many of these women. They had moved into parenting or jobs without having a goal to propel their actions. They had accepted without challenge the spoken or unspoken decisions made by their teachers or families that college was not in their future. Attending the community college helped them to understand that living a deliberate life provided a focus and led to a sense of accomplishment and value.

Renee shared a similar awakening. She needed to work at least part-time, and planned to adjust her hours when the fall semester of classes began. She related:

> Over the summer I worked full-time, and they didn't want to allow me to go back to part-time. So, I quit because *I'm going to school.* And I think I was really scared. I think by the time I graduated and I could see the end of the tunnel, I knew I was gonna get the degree, I had much more confidence. I was happier. I could actually see my life getting better. It was definitely a process. It didn't happen overnight. I think I had taken the time to stop and look at *me* and what I wanted and I had started to learn not to care what other people thought of me or who other people thought I was. I knew what I wanted and what I wanted for my family. Because I had a lot of friends say, "You are so stupid, why don't you get a job? Why are you working part-time and doing all that struggling with those kids?" "To go to school." "Get a job!" Well, I did have people who said to me . . . "Why are you bothering?"

This sense of coming to grips with their own power and ability to take responsibility for their destinies was repeated time and again by the women interviewed in this study. Recognizing choices, learning to make decisions, and developing the confidence to achieve their goals was a major change for these women.

At 57, Letha spoke about her newly found sense of herself in the following way:

> It's--I feel like I-- well, I know I can do something different now. If somebody tells me, "OK, we're gonna move you to here, you have to learn this job!" I bet I can do it. Before it was like, "Oh my God! Do I have to do this?!?" I mean, if you make yourself go to school, and you make yourself learn, there's not much else that you can't do. If you go to school and somebody gives you a different job, [you think] "I can do it!"

Looking forward to the completion of her baccalaureate degree and starting in a master's program in the fall, Gayl spoke about how her attitudes changed at the community college when she developed a broader perspective and a similar sense of empowerment. She related:

> What eventually got me past the insecurity was things like Professor H. encouraging me and giving me responsibilities. Phi Theta Kappa was just a tremendous place for me to grow. I can't separate that from the school experience. It may have been extra-curricular, but it was something that was woven throughout my school experience, and is still in my school experience today. The confidence that he showed in me, like the day that I became the Public Relations Chair for our chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, someone called

and asked if we would help them with an alternative high school college fair. He put me on the phone and put me in charge of hosting this thing. That was the same day that I got the office. So that showed a tremendous amount of confidence on his part in my abilities. I had no choice but to rise to that confidence level. And when I got through it, and saw how it was all coming together and I was able to do that--I felt like I could do anything! Like there was nothing I couldn't do if I set my mind to it.

Gayl shared other examples:

Getting a B in a math class--when math is something that I had failed so many times in high school, and here I had just learned how to multiply and divide in the fall of 1993! Those are things that really gave me the confidence to keep going. [Then] I saw a problem and I brought it to the school's attention--they were gonna do away with our note taker program, they said there wasn't enough funding for it. And I screamed Americans with Disabilities Act, and you guys have to comply with this! And they said, "Well, we have to differ, we can't afford to so we're going to have to do away with it. You'll have to find volunteers," and all this. And I raised a fuss. I went political. I went to the media. I went everywhere I had to, and finally I wound up sitting down with the Director of the Special Needs Department and helping her put together a program that would work. It wasn't so much any one particular thing that the school did for me, other than providing the opportunity for me to do something for others. It actually showed me that I

had the power within myself to do things that had to be done. Whether it was doing volunteer work, like I did with PTK, or whether it was spearheading something for the school that had to be done, like I did with the note taker program. Those are things that I learned that I had to do--if I could, I had to. And in something like that where I could just as easily have said, "Well, I guess I'm not going to do well in school because I don't have a note taker--and all this stuff and that." I thought, "Wait a minute, I'm graduating in six months. There are going to be thousands of learning disabled students and students with all kinds of disabilities coming through this school, and they're gonna need note takers." And I just went, "Yeah! This is gonna get done! We're gonna do this!"

While some women found their college work to be mentally and emotionally empowering, others-- like Mary C. and Shirlene--found the experience incredibly invigorating. As Shirlene attested:

My dad was concerned that I was spending a lot of hours here [at MVCC] at one point, and he said, "You're just getting yourself run down--you're tired all the time."[To which she replied, ] "Dad, I'm tired all the time because I have a thyroid problem. I have a physical reason to be tired. If I was at home, I'd be worse--I would be vegetating if I was at home, because there wouldn't be anything to stimulate me. *This is keeping me alive,* Dad. Don't worry about me, I'm fine."

The value of the community college experience for these women was clearly

demonstrated by their own reports. Going to college was a transforming experience for them, as they became empowered to think and act on their own behalf. This empowerment changed the course of their lives by focusing their talents, providing entree to new careers, and providing a source of stimulation that was missing. These experiences provide significant support for the value of the community colleges experience for re-entry women. How they talk about these experiences to others provides further insight and multiplies the value of the time and energy they put toward receiving their associate's degrees.

Admissions Ambassadors

The women who participated in this study were eager to talk about their community college experiences and proudly mentioned assignments, awards, and special experiences. To a person, they claimed to have advised others interested in enrolling in community college classes to "go for it!" and "just do it!" Their encouragement often highlighted the quality of instruction in community college classrooms, reasonable tuition rates and flexible academic schedules. They urged others to ease slowly into the course work; to do their very best; and to take advantage of the many resources available to students, especially financial assistance and tutoring.

> With great enthusiasm, these graduates echoed Lee's sentiments when she said:
>
> Why in the world would you want to go to a four-year university until you've been to WBCC? I think that for the money--and especially if you don't know what you want to do--you should start at a community college. And, for someone young to have their parents spend all of that money on a four-year university, and for them to maybe then realize that school is not for them . .

> . The facilities that are there; the computer rooms . . . to me, it's so great--so fantastic--to have that facility [the community college campus] close to home.

Ad Lena also actively recruited students for her community college, WBCC. She reported:

> Oh, honey, I've been telling them "You've got to go! You don't know what you're missing! Why are you going to so-and-so place?? Why are you going there?" I get animated about it! "Why are you going there! Do you realize what you have in your own community? You have to call! You have to go out to the campus! You have to make an appointment with them there. You don't know what you're missing! Why are you leaving--you have what you need right here!!!"

She continued:

> I've done that to people. I have a girlfriend that's going to school now. I talked to her and she's still attending. I have another little friend, a young girl who has had some real challenges in her life. One of the things I do for her--she goes to WBCC and it's a struggle--but I continue to tell her it's a wonderful place. She has found a place that has helped her to validate herself. She's involved in some extra-curricular activities there, and I think it really has been a positive thing for her in her life. Now I'm talking to my husband. And I'm gonna do that. Either they accept it or not, but I just tell them, either accept it or don't, but don't count it out. My brother lives in Indiana, and he's going to be moving here. I've got him a WBCC catalog already!

Aja's encouragement to others reflects her own experiences at GTC. She reported:

> I would definitely say "GO." Keep in touch with the counselors. Figure out what you want and where you're headed, and take some fun classes that you might enjoy first. Enjoy the process, and then get serious. Or at least try to take one fun class a semester.

Enjoy the process. This is good advice. Too often, as these women spoke about their determination to be successful, as measured by grades or degrees, they reflected only in retrospect upon the joyful side of their community college experience. Taking the time to enjoy the classes, colleagues, and process of learning frequently seemed weighted down by the fears, obligations, and stresses which were embedded in the experience. Joy in the journey is an important lesson to learn and to teach others.

Caitlynn's advice about college also reflects her experience. She proudly took credit for the success of:

> My girlfriend, Diane, who is going now and will be graduating this year. I just told her, "What are you doing?" She worked for [a company] for 15 years, and one day they just walk in and say, "You're through, leave." Well, basically, it made her sick, caused hypertension, stress disorders, a lot of stuff that was already wrong with her but it contributed to it. She had to have a kidney transplant. She went through a lot. After the kidney transplant, she's on disability and she said, "What do I do now?" And I said, "Girl, go back to school. You always said that if you had time you would do something like that. MVCC is close for you. . . it's cheap. You'll qualify for the Pell Grant

> now that you're on disability"--because we always made too much before--and I said, "You'll get help. Go through as a displaced worker. . . they'll help you." I told a lot of people--my mom's beautician--she owns her own shop, and a lot of her customer's granddaughters are getting pregnant and are single parents. [I say] don't sit there and be on Public Aid and whine and cry and live off the government or live off your parents. Get your butt out there while the government still is going to pay for it. I see it like this: the government still is gonna pay single parents--I'm not going to say mothers, because there's men, too--but single parents. They're gonna pay them to sit around and do nothing, and they're gonna pay them to sit around and do something. So why don't you do something? The government's not going to be there forever.

These are wise words from a public aid recipient who is now a successful college graduate!

Other graduates were proud to share success stories of others that had followed their example. Diana reported that her husband would "read over papers. . . and be the critic: 'What is this?' You know. He's in college now, too. He had taken classes before, but never really completed anything. But now he's in school over at the University."

Mary C. was quite emotional when she mentioned her influence in her family:

> My youngest sister has since gone to back and is graduating December 18 from the nursing college. She did this with four kids--two babies. She worked her butt off, but she says when she saw that I did it, she thought she could do it. And she's a lot younger than me; she's seventeen years younger than I

> am, maybe 32 [years old]. It was a lot of work for her, and difficult for her with her family and children and those horrid classes. . . I mean, that nursing program has a wonderful reputation as one of the hardest nursing schools in the whole country. She got a job already. She's so happy. I'm so happy and so proud of her. I mean, I can't even talk to her without wanting to cry, I'm so proud of her!

Letha spoke with similar delight and emotion about a colleague at work who shared her desire for a college degree. She recalled:

> This one guy I worked with over in the warehouse, we was talking one day--he's a black guy, about 40 years old, I guess. We were talking one day, and I said something about going back to school, and he said, "I really should go back." And I said, "Well, how far did you get?" And he said, "I think I got about twelve more credits to do." And--his name is Angelo--I said, "Angelo! Why don't you do it?!" Well, he said, "I took this math class and I flunked it. I've got a lot against me, and on an on and on." So I said, "I know just the man you should take your math class with!!" And he did. He started back. He'd say, "Uhhhh, I don't know if I'm gonna stay with it." I'd say, "Angelo! Yes, you are!!!" And, so he started in and he said, "When are you gonna graduate, Letha?" and I said, "Well, I get out in December." And then I found out there was no graduation ceremony, and I said, "I don't get to graduate until May." And he goes, "I'm gonna be there with you." So I said, "Are you sure?!" And he said, "Yep. If I have to take three classes at one

time, I'm gonna be there with you." And we graduated together!! (laughter) He said if it hadn't been for me he'd have never gone back! I was probably more proud of him than of me!!

Similarly, Renee was responsible for a major shift in her family's educational credentials. She told of her considerable influence:

> I have six sisters older than I am, and I was the first one to receive my degree. I'm the next to the youngest. And I have a sister that received her associate's last year, and she's working on her bachelor's. And I have an older sister that has just re-entered. . . I think her junior year. And I have two other sisters that are just now deciding to go to school; and my brother-in-law is going to school. I think they started college and then they stopped to get married and have their families or what ever. My sister told me that I was their role model.

Some re-entry women, like Annie, could tell of the second-hand impact of their college studies. She related:

> My second son, Paul, is a high school teacher, and one day he told me about a student he had--a young man--who was having some money problems in his family. And he [the young man] said, "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to go to college, I think I'm going to have to go to work for a while. And that will change my whole life. I won't be able to do what I want to do." And, it was right after this article [about Annie as a senior-citizen student], when Paul said to him, "Come on in my office, I want to show you something."

> And he showed him the article. He said to the young man, "That's my mother. You can do it [go to college] any time."

These brave and determined women did more than just succeed in attaining their degrees--their success rippled throughout their families and their communities to empower others that they worked with, lived with, or would never meet. Was their experience valuable? No doubt. The women who were interviewed reported being personally empowered by their community college experiences and further empowered by being role models for others.

It is important, however, to delve more fully into their assessment of their community college experiences by investigating their perceptions of the culminating ceremony--graduation--and the pride that had or had not accompanied this achievement.

The Associate's Degree is Conferred

Five of the eighteen women who were interviewed for this study did not attend the graduation ceremonies at their community colleges. Bonnie was too focused on her job search and chose to spend a quiet evening with a rented movie instead. Dina "wanted to [march], but I was too late for the application deadline. I really just missed the boat. Something I made sure not to do here [baccalaureate institution]. I really did want to walk. It would have made me feel really good, but I missed it."

Lee shared Dina's regret about not attending the ceremony--and some irritation as well. She recalled:

> I wanted to, but I had messed up the paperwork. I'm still not sure--in fact, it really torqued me--because, I don't know if I didn't understand it right;

> but I had a 3.9 [GPA], and I really wanted to go to my graduation ceremony. I thought that if you had a high grade point average you were announced "with honors," but apparently they don't at WBCC. I called and asked about that, but apparently they don't and I was really torqued. I had asked to go through the ceremony, but I never got any information on it. And, I thought, "Well, I guess that's it." I got it in the mail. I got my diploma in the mail, and I was really disappointed.

Ad Lena wasn't sure why she chose not to formally graduate from WBCC. She reflected "I don't know. The only reason I can think of is because Mother wasn't there." As she looked toward completing her bachelor's degree, however, Ad Lena intended to correct what she saw as a mistake, by attending the ceremony and wearing her mother's college tassel on the mortarboard!

Students who graduated in December had mixed feelings about attending a ceremony in May. This ambivalence influenced Mary C.'s decision to forego the graduation activities--or maybe just gave her a reason to stay away. When asked if she attended graduation, she responded: "No. It was December. Besides, I guess I was a little embarrassed to be so old."

After completing their degrees, Renee and Aja chose to march at graduation for rather pragmatic reasons: it was important for them to mark the completion of this major milestone in a symbolic way. As Aja recounted:

> It was nice. It was really nice. I kind of had mixed feelings about it [graduation]. I thought about not going in, but I figured it would mark a step for me instead of figuring I had been going to school forever and hadn't

> accomplished anything. You know, I hadn't walked across that stage since high school, so it was nice. I enjoyed it.

Renee adopted a more philosophical tone when she observed:

> You know, some call it "commencement." It's not commencement--it's graduation. I've done all this work! I think we are so busy moving on to the next step, sometimes we don't take the time to stop and celebrate where we're at. I know so many people that received degrees from WBCC and they did not walk the stage. And to me, that's an accomplishment to be doing it and have my children in the audience to see that all that stress wasn't for vain--it wasn't for nought. We actually are moving forward. That's what graduation meant to me, I'm moving forward. I finally felt like I was progressing.

Other re-entry women also reported their pleasure at having family and friends bear witness to the pomp and circumstance that marked their successful graduation. For Annie, the pleasure was accompanied by a sense of awe. She reminisced:

> There was a time when I thought this [graduation] would never be for me. I felt so proud--for me--for who I was. It's almost as if there were two people who graduated that day: Annie O at 18 and Annie D at 77. It was. . . .It was--how can I say *the* most important? I mean, I have kids. But it was important just *for me all by myself.* It was something that I had done, and I really felt so good about it. I had been to two graduations [at WBCC]--one was two years after I started there--a gal who was in one of my classes graduated and I went

> to see that. I tell you, as soon as they started that music [hums Pomp and Circumstance] I hardly could contain myself. It was just. . . I was just overcome with the whole thing. It was like being in church to me! And then, when [another friend] graduated I was there--and the same thing happened as soon as that music started! I was so worried that it would happen that day [my graduation]. I thought, I just can't walk in there blubbering! I would hang onto my hands or and see what I can do. I didn't feel like that at all! Not a bit! It was just wonderful. I just felt so good walking in to that music. I didn't feel a lump in my throat when I went up for my diploma--I just felt like I had Annie O. by the hand and the two of us were going up there.

Annie was clearly reverential about her college degree, likening her pride to having given birth and raising children. In many ways, her analogy of marching hand-in-hand with the young woman she had been who was denied a college education hints at a re-birth of a part of her that had been dormant for many years.

Datoria shared Annie's metaphoric sense of her graduation ceremony. Perhaps it was the distance that they both traveled that perked their descriptions of their college graduation experience. Datoria began her journey as a single mother of three on welfare. Fearing she might lose her children, she decided to complete a GED and enroll in the community college. It was a big transition for Datoria, who admitted that included with her academic fears, were her fears of

> . . . white people. I was very afraid of white people. They scared me, oh, so much. The only thing I could think about was: "Are these people gonna be

> mean?" But [at MVCC] I saw a whole new different side. Instead of the color thing, I saw them being just like me. We're all striving, we're all doing this.

Four years later, Datoria found herself getting a community college degree, with her mother and her children in the audience. She recalled:

> Basically, I was so small you couldn't see me! (laughter) I was the shortest person. When they handed me the diploma, they had to look down on me! *Honest to God!* But when I got it, I felt bigger; I felt tall! This is the honest to God truth! My mom says, "You're one of the shortest people!" But it felt good. People said, "You feel big?!" And I said, "Yes, I feel big!" Physically and everything--emotionally--but I was one of the shortest persons. But I felt different about myself. And I still do. I feel like I've gained something. I've accomplished something. I've accomplished one of my main goals: to graduate from a college.

Linda accomplished her goal as well. For her the conferring of degrees "was scary. I didn't trip, it was just scary. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, so many people!'" Five of her six children were among the crowd, and they purchased a video tape for her son who was serving in the military at the time. Although her boyfriend had to work, he bought her a new dress to wear and paid to have her hair styled. After the ceremony, they "just went home."

Several of the women commented on the sense that their participation in the graduation ceremony was, in part, a comment to all of those people who didn't think they could do it. MG's parents, son, and husband joined her for the day. Oddly enough, she

recalled:

> I purposely didn't tell my father I was valedictorian, because he is someone who, when we grew up, always said, "You can do better." Nothing was ever, ever good enough. And it was like part of me wanted him to be surprised; the other part of me wanted to say, "See!"

Needless to say, "He was very pleased, and then he had to tell his whole family!"

Robin, too, shared a poignant story of her very matter-of-fact celebration of a major event. Although rather lengthy, her story is worth repeating. She recalled her graduation in the following way:

> It's funny. We went to McDonald's. My dad came up, and he brought my sister, and my older brother and my niece. Then [her work-study supervisor and Options/Opportunities Program coordinator] came with their husbands, and on the video you can hear them yell, "Yeah Robbie!" Considering they were way up in the balcony of the Center and I was up on stage--and you could actually hear them. Well, the guy--the video tech--was right by them.
>
> And so my dad said, . . . . Well, Scott, he was in my class--not the young kid--he was married and had a little boy. He was a little wild, but he was like 27 or so. He [Scott] had invited us to go to Pizza Hut, but my dad doesn't tolerate tomato stuff. And he said, "Well, if you want to go there we can, but it's your day--where do you want to go?" And I said, "I want to go to McDonald's and get an Arch Deluxe!" To me it was something I don't get to do very often, especially depending on funds, you just don't do it. They

said, "Are you sure?!" "Yep." So we went there. And I think we went to Wal-Mart afterward. He [Dad] was talking about needing something, and I said, "Well, Wal-Mart's open." And he said, "Well, it's 10:30 p.m." And I said, "Our Wal-Mart never closes." And he couldn't believe it; he lives in [another town] and their Wal-Mart closes. I can't remember his words, but he was really surprised.

Robin continued her story:

I loved it. It's nice to say I have a college degree. Sometimes I think, "Should I mark that [box on a survey]? I didn't go to [name of four-year college]." But I do [mark the box], because I have a college degree. It's nice. It's not to put down anybody who doesn't go in any way. For me, it was a sense of accomplishment that I did this.

Robin's story unraveled further:

You know, I had problems when I was growing up. I was born without a roof on my mouth. So that was really kind of hard for my mom to take. To her I was dumb because I didn't talk. Because I was born with that-- and my ears stuck out really bad, too--my mom used to put my hair in bobby pin curls so it would cover up my ears. She always made me feel kind of like I wasn't as smart as my older sister. So I guess when I got that [diploma]--I mean, she wasn't there--I haven't seen her in many years--but it was like, "Well, I'm not so stupid, huh?" I like this accomplishment and seeing my daughter so pleased. The nicest thing is being able to say, "Yes, I graduated from

college."

Like others before her, Robin had traveled miles to march across the stage at graduation. She had encountered emotional, physical, and mental challenges and she had more than survived--she had thrived. And, with quiet grace, she took great pleasure in the accomplishment.

Robin's experience is in great contrast to Shirlene, who was applauded by family, friends, neighbors, fellow students, and even associates from Japan. She smiled as she remembered:

> My whole cheering section--and they did cheer! They tried to embarrass me, it didn't work. I'm not embarrassed easily. But they got lots of pictures. I was proud to cross the stage with not only the honors cord, but the PTK honors stole, and the honors tassel. And I have all of those things hanging from the handles from my computer desk at work. Right over my computer. They're not dusted as frequently as they should be, but they hang there, and the cat likes to look at them and bat the tassel on occasion.

Shirlene's pleasure at her accomplishment was quite evident in the breadth of people she invited to celebrate with her and the public display of her academic awards. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of the community college degree, Shirlene responded:

> It doesn't matter that it's community college to me. The difference between my degree--a community college degree--and a bachelor's degree is that my degree was designed to get me out into the work force and a four-year degree is designed to be continued--preparatory and eventually used to get you into

> the workforce. So I just skipped the two years that were preparatory (laughter). To me it's a college degree, and I was thrilled to get it, and I did go out into the workforce, and I did get one terrific job as a result. It just means a lot to me. I had to go out and get a piece of paper that said I could do this; and I did get a piece of paper that says I can do it. And now I am taken seriously, and I have a very good job--with retirement!

Caitlynn expressed a similar sense of satisfaction with her community college degree. She said:

> I have a sense of pride. I don't think that I would feel any better than if I graduated from [local four year college] or the University. I think MVCC is just as good a school. I did the A.A.S. because I wanted a degree, but I didn't want to go to school my whole life to get one. And I wouldn't have went my whole life, but by the time that I would have taken my prerequisites to take most of the courses that were offered it would have been two years in prerequisites, two years for the A.A. or the A.S., and two more years for the bachelor's. And I just thought, "No." I just want something that will show an employer that I took the time to learn a field, to be committed to something, and for me to know that I could get a career out of it.

Many of the re-entry women in this study--as was the case in Nancy LaPaglia's (1994) research--spoke about their community college degrees as a "step"-- a "step in the right direction"; a "step toward a goal"; or an "extra step" that set them apart from most of their colleagues at work. Perhaps the most vivid indication of the power of that step was

found in Gayl's words, as she described her community college degree in the following manner:

> It's a badge of honor. I was told I would never be able to finish high school, so the fact that I did it [college] makes me stand taller. I'm proud. It was not something that anyone believed I could have done; it's not anything that I believed I could have done. My parents had always told me I was a "quitter," and I proved them wrong. It was like I was gonna do this, and nothing was gonna get in the way. And damn it, I did!! I was just in shock. I graduated with a high GPA, went from there to a school where I was on scholarship, and I got the scholarship because of my grades and my community service, which I also did while I was working and going to school. I was proud! But it was a sense of having done something that was just like climbing Mount Everest!

All of the women who participated in this study accomplished their community college goals in much the same way as people who *do* climb Mount Everest: one foot in front of the other; one step at a time. The next section will look at where those steps carried them in terms of their goals after completing the associate's degree.

The Degree Was Worth It--But What's It Worth?

In many different ways, this study offers evidence that pursuing a community college degree was very much worth the time and energy invested by these re-entry women students. By their own examples, the intangible benefits of enhanced self-esteem and pride join more measurable evidence of broken cycles of dependence on public welfare and improved

employment opportunities. Interestingly, although every graduate affirmed the worth of their efforts, they were not all certain that the degree had "value." In fact, when asked directly, four of the eighteen women responded, "no" or "not yet." Three of these women were enrolled in baccalaureate programs, and seemed to connect the degree's value with the financial rewards it might deliver. Although she was at a local university, for instance, when asked if her associate's degree was valuable, Diana laughingly claimed "I haven't used it yet. I haven't traded on it." Datoria echoed this sentiment by offering the following reply to the value question: "Not yet. Not until I get into a good paying job." Aja was a bit more tentative in her rejection of the degree's value, answering the question more broadly:

> Not really, not yet. I know that they say with an associate's degree you can make more money, but I haven't been in a situation to say, "I have this." At [names university], I don't think they really looked at it. I mean, they looked at my grades and my transcript, my recommendations, more so than the fact that I have the associate's degree. But I did come in as a junior, so I guess that is a factor.

Only one graduate in the workforce felt that her degree had not yet yielded its true value. Caitlynn shared the following observations when asked if her degree was valuable to her:

> I'm not really sure if it has been or not. I graduated and went right to [Company Name], got hired. I haven't really had a chance to use it. Yes, my resume says I have a degree in office technology medical. I do know that my supervisor was impressed by the degree. I would like to think that it did, but

> the point is, I'm overqualified for my job. I didn't need that degree to land the job that I landed. And I think back to myself now, "You mean I went two and a half years thinking I needed this degree for that kind of job? Because, I mean I don't make buku money, but I make pretty good an hour and have good benefits. To think I could have had that job years ago. . .but then, maybe I wouldn't have. Maybe I couldn't have gotten the job without the degree. Who knows. All I know is the job did not require a degree.

Other participants in the study ascribed either financial or personal value to their associate degrees. As Shirlene noted earlier, her degree secured her better money, respect and retirement benefits. Robin also recognized that her degree was essential to her career advancement. She observed:

> Without it, I wouldn't have had my job. The different classes I took gave me some knowledge in different areas. I wish I'd had a few more computer classes, though. I'm learning Lotus by trial and error. It helped me because it helped me to get the job I wanted. Without it I wouldn't have my job. And, it gave me a mixture of different experiences, too.

Bonnie's degree had more personal value to her. She noted, "Oh, yeah. I said, if there's one thing I never I accomplished in my life--I did this! And I've got one [college diploma] on my wall!!" Bonnie's degree is clearly a life-time achievement!

As is her style, Gayl eloquently fleshed out the deeper value of her degree when she observed:

> In the very first place, it's given me the self confidence and sense of

> accomplishment that is even greater than having to learn to multiply and divide and take that GED. It's that piece of paper in hand that validates me as "being educated." That, in itself, is valuable to me. Once I have my bachelor's degree, my associate's degree isn't gonna matter anyplace I go, except to me. And I want that.

MG carried the "piece of paper" image a bit further when she noted: "'Personally, it's a piece of paper. It was valuable to me in that I learned that I could do what I wanted, but it's just a piece of paper and the experiences are more." For MG, the real value was in what the "piece of paper" allowed her to do, motivated her to do, and verified she had done.

If, then, the value of the degree is best demonstrated in its effectiveness in moving re-entry women toward their personal or career goals, this factor must also be taken into account in this study. These outcomes are most enlightening.

Seventy-seven year old Annie relocated to a less costly part of the state. After settling into her new home and community, she looked forward to checking in at the community college to pursue some classes that didn't fit into her schedule. She has not ruled out the possibility of a bachelor's degree, but she knows that the rich community college curriculum could meet her thirst for knowledge for many semesters to come.

Eight of the eighteen women interviewed moved directly into a baccalaureate program upon completion of their associate's degrees, and five of the eight had already earned the four-year degree. Two of the five were considering graduate study. In evaluating the effectiveness of their community college academic preparation, all of the women who continued their studies agreed that they were academically competitive when they moved to

a four-year college or university setting. They noted that they felt well grounded in their subject area and felt they had developed important tools for success. Gayl, for instance, shared the various ways she believed that GTC had prepared her for her university program:

> I think it was really important, first of all, because of the self-confidence factor. If I'd come here without having gone to a junior college, I think I would have been unprepared. Just from the perspective of sitting down and doing work. Just taking on the responsibilities for the first time. I'll be honest with you--at GTC my work load was much less than what I'm doing now. I may be a senior now, but even in the work that I've got for one 200 level course this year (it's one that I over looked for my English), I have more work than I had in my 100 and 200 level courses at GTC. If I had not had the experience of having done those assignments--having gotten them in on time and in the manner in which they were assigned--I don't know that I would necessarily be as prepared to do that now. [Thinking that] I would be able to prioritize is wrong--I don't do it all that well--A.D.D.s [Attention Deficit Disorders] have a very difficult time organizing; organizational skills are very bad, very difficult for us. If I hadn't had that experience at GTC, I don't know that I would have learned how to at least recognize where I have to stop and do something. I probably would have been well in over my head here. Also, the fact that I started there part-time and worked myself into it to where I was able to tread water and then learn how to swim, then I was more prepared for coming here. I also had some understanding of how to write an

> essay. The dynamics of the introduction, the body and the conclusion--how the conclusion has to go back to the introduction--those are things that are easily overlooked if you haven't had that kind of a background. All those kinds of basic, preparatory things. And, above all, getting that mindset to where you understand that "yes, this is important," and, "yes, if you wanted it done, you have to do it!" At [the university] you do not have professors standing over you saying, "Are you done with that assignment yet? Are you ready to turn it in yet?" Whereas, at GTC you learned that if you didn't have it in it was either going to be marked down for each day that it wasn't turned in, or it wouldn't be accepted at all. You learned that. And, occasionally you would have a professor who would say, "Alright, I have a list on my desk and it's marked with the assignments that are in. Before you leave at the end of the class, take a look at the list and see which ones you haven't completed yet." So, she was able to keep us on track. That was one of the things that helped, "How did I miss getting that one turned in?" Whereas here, if you had that background and you're used to having your papers turned in when they're supposed to be turned in, on time, in the right format, then, being here it's much easier to self-motivate. You have to internalize that motivation.

While most of the group of continuing scholars shared Gayl's sense that they were prepared in their subject areas, they did not as easily make the transition to the academic culture of their new institutions. Aja expected some challenges when she enrolled at a highly selective university, but was surprised to learn that:

> [University Name] is totally different! They don't review, which shocked me, because GTC does. They take you through what you learned or what you should have learned, and then they start. [University Name] starts the minute you walk into the classroom-- from that time on, it's up to you to review and also have read the material in advance. That's stuff that GTC said they wanted you to [do], but they kind of didn't stress it--you could play catch up. The transition was hard.
>
> And the papers! That was just totally difficult. We wrote research at GTC--in English you had to write the research paper--but a research paper is different from an essay where you have to compare and contrast, or promote your own opinion and talk about Socrates and his whole idea! Oh my goodness!

Datoria experienced similar culture shock when she transferred to a small private college. She reported that WBCC had prepared her academically, and "basically gave me a taste of what college is like," but "I wasn't prepared for my peers." Asked to describe the student body, Datoria noted:

> Most of them live on campus. And most of the kids are from middle class families, upper class families. The African Americans that are there have dropped the classes that tend to be hard or demanding. They get in the door, and it's like, "This is a piece of cake." They play around and waste a lot of people's time. And it's not about that. You have to work. You have to work.

Datoria was thrown by the dissonance between her struggle to complete her degree

while surviving each day and the attitudes of entitlement she perceived in her fellow students. The work ethic that she had developed at MVCC helped her to maintain her focus and her confidence carried over from completing "a speech class over at MVCC, and I was able to present myself in the proper way, walk up in there with all the hams in there and think, 'I can do this; give me a chance.'"

Lee graduated from WBCC and enrolled at a large public institution to continue her education. She noted:

> WBCC prepared me really well. It gave me good grounding. But, I think that the counselors should have worked more with me to check, "Where do you want to go? A four year university? Then what are you taking now at WBCC that will prepare you for what you want to do at a four year school?" And that wasn't there.
>
> Maybe if I hadn't decided what I wanted to do I would have been a lot more successful. The atmosphere was completely different at that school [university], and even though WBCC has a large student population, there was a definite difference between what I felt there and what I felt at the university. *For me*, because I had people who told me that [the university] was the best thing that had ever happened to them. But I just didn't connect, and again, I'm an overachiever, and it didn't take me long to figure out that I was drowning. And, I think that kind of added to the turmoil. So, it was a lot of stress and the fact was, I was moving. I was changing. I was going from one school to another--and any time you do that, you're going into a

> different structure. My library was different, my computers were different--everything was different. It all added in to the stress.

After a semester of struggling, Lee transferred to a small liberal arts college closer to home. The fit was much better with her new college. She noted:

> Now [College name] was totally awesome! It was a smaller school--more intimate--they had more individual attention. I missed the tutoring--they didn't have the tutoring program--but by that time I had counted out from that--the atmosphere was more of the small school atmosphere, which I liked. It was a community of people, where it was easy to see your professor and they'd remember who you were. And that made a difference. Because you really could be on a more personal level--at the university they had 200-300 students to deal with. I had 200 students in my physics class! You were in a big auditorium, and the professor might think, "I know Lee, and I know what she can do. And if she comes and tells me if she can't get something done I know that she's telling me the truth, but if all of the students were to line up and tell me that 500 times a day, I don't want to hear it!"

Lee valued the direct interaction and rapport with her faculty that she had enjoyed at her community college. The large, impersonal university setting did not accommodate her need to be an individual, and she had great difficulty in that environment. Eventually, she sought a college that was more like her earlier, community college experience.

The importance of good counseling, especially working with each student as a whole student came up with several re-entry women during the interviews. Mary C. felt that:

> Some of them talked a good game. But when I told them I was interested in getting an education degree, I didn't get much support from them at all. I did not find the counseling office satisfactory. It was sort of like they were patronizing you. So, I think that's part of the reason why I really didn't go on to the four year college immediately. There was no support or direction as far as the counseling department went. It was all on my head, and I didn't exactly know exactly what to do.

Lee echoed the sense that support from the counseling office made a big difference as these students were outlining their career plans. She shared her disappointment in the interview:

> Had I had a counselor who would look at me as a student--not a non-traditional student, just a student--going back to get her degree so she could get a good job; if I had a professor who would look at me as a student coming in to that environment just like any other student, he might have picked up that I needed one more class to graduate Magna Cum Laude. If I had a counselor who had looked at my record--really looked at my record--they would have seen that if I had had two more hours, I would have been able to graduate with honors. They didn't look at it--they didn't even mention to me what they might have mentioned to a younger student because he's got to go out into the work force and it would look great on his resume. But they saw me as just a student who doesn't really care, who just needs a degree.

This side trip to examine the role of advice and counseling for these re-entry students

is important. The graduates discuss being grounded academically in their subject matter. Some mentioned transference of good study skills and work habits as important tools for later academic success. At the community colleges, they learned to value their own abilities and skills, yet they still needed direction and guidance. Those individuals--who were coming to grips with academic expectations--still needed help interpreting the process as they moved to the next level of higher education.

A final comment from a graduate who transferred to a university setting to complete her baccalaureate degree echoes Lee's sense of the community college as a place to be "grounded." MG reflected upon her community college endeavors as they influenced her junior and senior level performance in the following way:

> I think they gave me great grounding in the material and in becoming confident in what I can do. In doing that I learned that I can do whatever I want. Like I said before, the academics were not really "difficult" for me--don't get me wrong, I studied--I got all those As, but I studied. Like my biology class; that was a class I really dreaded. In very few classes would I start at the beginning of the semester saying, "Well, I can drop this one if I have to--if I get a C or less at midterm, I'll definitely drop this class." But that one I worked very hard at, and I did very well. And, from that point on, I knew I could do anything.

Confidence in one's ability to succeed is different than confidence in knowing what to do. The "seamless educational model" is very important for re-entry women or others who enter the higher education stream at less traditional points. They want to succeed. They have

the abilities to succeed. But they need direction to take that next step.

After completing their associate's degree programs, nine of the re-entry women interviewed continued their employment or moved into new positions in the work force. With the exception of Letha and Caitlynn, the women who worked after graduation felt their jobs were directly related to their areas of study and the degree attained. As mentioned earlier, Caitlynn was not sure if her degree secured her job. Letha--who took eleven years to complete her associate's degree--found the standards in her civil service work had changed during that time. She reported:

> [The degree] hasn't gained me anything because of my job. Just me. Just me [personally]. It's just right now that the government is so unstable. You never know if they're gonna close another base, or lay off more people, or go more contracted services. They think the contracts are saving them money, but in the long run I think it's costing them. But, that's neither here nor there. But, no, I could apply for jobs, but like I said, they used to say they wanted--what they said is in place of specialized experience, you could use your [two-year] degree as the experience. Now they're saying instead of the specialized experience, you could substitute it for a four-year college degree. So it's like, "What did I do it for?"

When asked if she planned to pursue a four-year degree, Letha's answer was non-committal. She replied:

> I've thought about it, but it's like, I stop to think how I struggled to do the two-year thing, I just don't think I could manage the four [year]. I could, I

> guess, if I really wanted to do it. But, like I said, in four years I'm gonna retire--maybe I'll go back to school then!

Maybe she didn't get the promotion or pay differential she had hoped for, but Letha clearly found value in her college experience and was willing to invest further time and energy in academic pursuits.

The remaining graduates in the workplace recognized the role their degrees had in helping them compete for their new jobs. Robin had moved into a highly technical field, for which she felt adequately prepared. She reported:

> I'm an AutoCAD technician now. I do CAD [computer assisted design] work. Here [MVCC] I had all three of the CAD classes, and then you have to take several different CAD, like structural steel and architecture. I also had microspace, which is a different form of drafting on the computer--a different program. I had them, too. It helped--that's what I do now.

When asked to assess the value of her associate's degree in her current position, Robin observed:

> Without it, I wouldn't have had my job. The different classes I took gave me some knowledge in different areas. I wish I'd had a few more computer classes, though. I'm learning Lotus by trial and error. It helped me because it helped me to get the job I wanted. Without it I wouldn't have my job. And, it gave me a mixture of different experiences, too.

Each of the women who moved into technological jobs recognized the need to continually upgrade their skills to remain current and expressed the wish that they had had

the opportunity to study specialized programs for the jobs they moved into. But they recognized that they would not have their jobs without the degrees. Bonnie observed: "That little degree, you'd be surprised what it does for your foot! I've gotten interviews with just that little edge of having that A.A.S. [degree] I may have not got the position, but I got my toe in the door."

Shirlene's work as an information technology specialist was the direct result of her "piece of paper." When asked to gauge the effectiveness and value of her degree to her success after graduation, Shirlene reiterated her early sense of the importance of the diploma in technological careers:

> The degree didn't teach me what I needed to know. Now, the honors courses--which none of them were in my program and none of them have anything to do with my degree--I learned a lot from those classes. And, the interactive teamwork that I learned in those classrooms certainly more than prepared me for a full-time-in-the-workplace job. But having had the piece of paper, that's what got me the job. And there is a direct link between having that and having the work I'm doing now.

For Shirlene, the "work that I'm doing now" represented respect, financial gain and long term security for this former stay-at-home mom.

Lessons Learned: The Value of an Education

The re-entry women students who graduated from community colleges and were interviewed for this study provided abundant material to substantiate the value of their experiences. There is no doubt that it was tough work from the moment they stepped into

the community college buildings until the moment they held their degrees in their hands and stepped up to the next challenge. However, it was work that propelled them forward toward goals they had not before dreamed possible.

These community college graduates were empowered to think of themselves and their circumstances differently, and they, in turn, helped others see new options in their lives. They were role models for their children, spouses, siblings, and co-workers. They learned lessons so important that they are priceless. And, whether they were 27 or 57 or 77 years old, these women unearthed surprising discoveries about themselves and the world they share. When asked to identify the one or two most important things they learned at their community colleges, the following answers emerged.

Caitlynn learned you only get out of something what you put into it; if you put in a little, the payback will also be modest. Robin recognized that you have to do your homework and that it helps to have at least one person to talk with about life's challenges. Shirlene realized that no matter what your age or sex or background, you are responsible for your own success or failure--and you can't blame others.

Linda learned that anybody can go to school--anybody can do it if they don't give up. Of course, creativity, resourcefulness and determination are key. Datoria learned that it's important to accept advice from others--peers and teachers; none of us has all the answers. And Bonnie reflected upon the fact that "no matter what you think you know, there's always more to know."

Dina learned to do a little each day, and stick with her goals--never give up! Diana learned to prioritize her time and activities, and--at 57 years of age and a long career in

collections--she was surprised to learn that *she really liked people* and valued the amazing diversity she discovered in her classrooms. Elese was pleased to have learned how to write essays, and believed that she could now see that there were two sides to every story. MG learned not to let fear stop her from doing things; and Aja learned to ask for help.

Mary C. learned that she has the capacity to do some things well and that being an expert is not a requirement for learning. Annie learned to trust her intuition and good sense as she followed her dreams. Pragmatic Lee extolled the importance of getting to know your professor and what he or she expects, and she discovered her own lack of tolerance for people who plan poorly and can't meet deadlines. Letha began to see that the world has lots of opportunities if you apply yourself; and Ad Lena came to learn that sometimes "good" is acceptable. Renee learned to not worry so much, and to value yourself. Renee's own words provide us with a priceless lesson; when asked to share what she had learned, she replied:

> Not to accept less than what I think I deserve, and, I think, be confident. Because I think a lot of students do [accept less]. You know, a D is still a passing grade. I could have taken that D and been on my way. But I didn't feel that; I probably got what I deserved as far as the grade, but I didn't think that I had what I should have had. And I think that was actually a lesson in life. That if I'm getting less than I think I should, I probably need to re-evaluate the situation. Maybe there's something I need to be doing differently.

The women who participated in this study clearly acted upon the "need to be doing something differently." As a result, their lives were forever changed--as were the lives of

many significant people around them. What they learned is of great personal value to each of them, but there are also lessons for higher education professionals in their individual and collective stories. The next section will extend the value of their experience by extracting new lessons and offering recommendations for future generations of re-entry women students.

## Value to the Higher Education Collective:

### Revisiting the Literature and Implications for Future Practice and Research

This study was undertaken to contribute to the considerable body of research on re-entry women students in higher education. Utilizing qualitative rather than quantitative research methods, this study explored a relatively unexamined student group--community college women--from the unique perspective of the graduate. Previous chapters and sections have described the experience of eighteen re-entry women as they navigated the community college system to attain their degrees. At this juncture, the focus returns to the literature on re-entry women students as a means of gleaning further insight from their narratives and experience. Next, attention is turned to the conclusions which this study illuminates including implications for assisting re-entry women in reaching their educational goals, and recommendations for further study.

#### The Research Revisited

This study verifies earlier findings that women re-enter higher education for myriad reasons and encounter various barriers to their success. Similar to findings of a variety of studies in the 1970s and 1980s, this small sample of re-entry women asserted motivational

factors which included economic necessity, career preparation and re-tooling to enhance employment options, the desire for intellectual stimulation, and the desire to fulfill a dream (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Johnson, Wallace & Sedlacek, 1983; Kahnweiler & Johnson, 1980). Just as their motivations to pursue further education parallel their forebears, the women in this study spoke of the "dispositional barriers" which were unearthed in these earlier studies (Astin, 1976; Hooper, 1979; Scott & King, 1985), including lack of confidence and low self-esteem, the pressure of multiple roles and expectations, and guilt and isolation which may result from changing their response to societal expectations. However, there have been changes in the last twenty years, as demonstrated by these community college women who failed to identify the "institutional barriers" noted in earlier studies (Plotsky, 1975). In fact, quite to the contrary, the women in this study applauded the flexible class schedules, generous financial assistance, child care programs, and inclusiveness that they encountered on the two-year college campuses. Likewise, their reference to "situational barriers," i.e., those barriers defined by cultural expectations, were modest and based less on gender expectations than age issues.

Kahnweiler and Johnson (1980) consolidated theories on adult development during the mid-life years in order to articulate concerns that women might have as they matured. This study confirmed several of their findings, including that participants appeared to analyze their mental processes and often related perceived intellectual deficits to physical changes and the aging process. Only Annie, at 77, spoke about her mortality and the limited period in which she might achieve her goals, although other participants recognized that the payback on their degree was inversely related to their age and the number of years it would take for

them to complete the four-year or graduate program required in their field. Others, like Aja, determined that achieving her dream of being a physician was sufficient compensation for the effort medical school demanded.

Although several women spoke of their unique situations as they worked to juggle academic and personal obligations, many more spoke of the sense of support and connectedness that they received from family, faculty, and fellow students in their community college programs. Thus, they were able to weather the stresses of their mid-life years because they were developing their self-esteem and were joined by other students who also engaged in the process of personal and professional development. A number of the women had become caretakers for parents, siblings, or aging relatives, and just as many were caring for young children, teens, or adult children. They took this nurturing role for granted, and some even transferred it to the college setting in their interaction with less mature students. Lastly, although many of the women in this study were divorced or single and were accustomed to meeting their own needs, the married women in this group found that their college study strengthened their relationships with their spouses rather than creating friction as previous researchers have suggested (Kahnweiler & Johnson, 1980; Scott & King, 1985). Most husbands appeared to appreciate and respect the potential for additional income that the college degree promised and some of the men were instrumental in providing tutoring, proofreading, or advice as their wives pursued their degrees.

A final observation regarding adult development and life cycle studies which has been advanced previously (Levinson et al., 1978) and was substantiated by this research is the presence of a culminating event or "Dream" for many of these women. The re-entry

women who were interviewed may have embraced the dream of completing a college degree begun or desired at an earlier point, or a dream of teaching, working in business, earning a respectable wage, or providing a strong role model for her children. As they described the attainment of their degrees they spoke of "feeling bigger," of satisfaction that rivaled the satisfaction of motherhood, and of attaining an edge that set them apart in a special and positive way. The community college experience was certainly a method for both articulating and achieving their elusive life dreams. In order to succeed in that educational arena, each of these women needed to ask the key question posed by Levinson and Levinson (1996): "What do I really want for myself?" (p. 239). Sometimes the women answered this question by alienating family or friends or sacrificing every day luxuries and even necessities. But at some point they each asked the question--answered "an education"--and pursued their dream.

Previous educational researchers who have focused exclusively on women's development (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982) assert that "women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development and that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined" (Belenky et al, 1986, p. 18). It follows then, that as the women in this study worked to develop their mind (intellect), they also found their sense of self and their voice--or power--in a society where they had historically been reactive and responsive rather than proactive. While many of these women had been economically and educationally deprived--as were the silenced knowers identified by Belenky et al., they utilized the resources available to them to escape their small towns and worlds. Sometimes those resources were relationships that faltered, ending in

divorce. Sometimes they were jobs or children or public assistance. The women in this study traveled multiple avenues--guided by the "still small voice" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 54) from which they drew sufficient strength to acknowledge their inherent value and the personal resources that would allow them to achieve significant life goals. In this regard, the women in this study parallel the subjective knowers observed by Belenky et al.--knowers who were often re-entry students thriving in flexible community college educational settings.

However, the diversity of this participant pool is evident in the procedural knowers who depended upon research and analysis to interpret their worlds. Sometimes the discipline of study became the objective tool for viewing the world, as with Aja's medical research leaning or MG's use of photography to inspect the subtle shadings of her life and plans. Sometimes connections provided the lens for the procedural knowing of these women, like Annie who struggled to understand the younger students, or Datoria who explored new understandings of race and culture in the academy. It is evident that the community colleges in this study were the catalysts that these women needed to find their voices. Respectful, patient, and empowering, the community college environments proved to be rich incubation grounds for these women as they came to know themselves and their worlds.

The findings of various adult learning researchers (Brookfield, 1986; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Knox, 1977; Smith, 1982) were validated time and again by the women who were interviewed for this study. Confirming Knox's findings, the re-entry women in this study spoke often of their learning being strongly influenced by "time, persistence, and assistance" (p. 469). Multiple sections of classes offered at various times of the day or evening provided a flexibility that was appreciated by these re-entry women. The act of

enrolling and then re-enrolling in classes--especially mathematics classes--demonstrated an extraordinary persistence and desire to understand the unfamiliar concepts being presented. In addition, the community college programs complemented these re-entry students' ready dispositions to seek additional help or attend available tutoring options. The dilemma for the re-entry women in this study was the fact that so much of what they knew of education was no longer accurate. Even if they had been good students in grade school or high school--and many of them obviously were not good students--information today is taught and processed differently than it was in the 1940s, or 1960s, or even the early 1990s. Note Annie's observations:

> When I got to history [in college] I saw that *all* of these things are part of history, which wasn't the way it was taught when I was in school before. There was a lot about dates and names and battles and that sort of thing. But, I didn't realize what had caused those. I didn't realize there was social upheaval; I would never have understood what that was. Or that there were religious factors that entered in. And it's all of this and how all of this affected the people. And it all comes together and makes history.

Technology, global perspectives, real-time information and computer generated models have made facilitating connections between earlier learning experiences and the current challenges of learning increasingly tentative for the adult learners in this study. They do benefit, however, from their pragmatic approaches (Lee: "when they give you that syllabus and they say they want a 300 word paper? By golly, Lee, that's what they mean. . .a 300 word paper!"); their understanding of what they need to succeed (Aja: "I like someone

to go over it a couple of times and maybe even review"); and new understandings of their personal histories and behaviors (Letha: "you try not to believe that's what happened, but, I think I got pregnant on purpose just so I didn't have to go to school").

The women in this study confirmed the conclusions of previous observations by Stephen Brookfield (1986) that challenging problems and situations are much more rewarding than those that are most easily solved. Dina overcame negative numbers and decided to major in mathematics; speech classes were frequently cited as the most avoided and most beneficial required classes that these re-entry women encountered.

It is perhaps Jerold Apps' work on adult learning that is most instrumental in understanding the environment for success that these women found in their community college settings. Referring to the nine exemplary teaching principles Apps explicated in 1981, there is clear evidence in the narratives of these community college graduates regarding the importance they placed on being known by faculty; having classes structured around a variety of techniques and formats; being provided with practical examples of concepts which incorporate their range of experiences; receiving ongoing feedback, direction and encouragement to utilize various resources; and benefitting faculty who extended themselves in both classroom and non-classroom settings. In addition, various women in this study affirmed the psychological and biological barriers that Apps believed worked against the success of adult learners in the college classroom: poor self-esteem, fading vision, hearing problems and slower response times (1991). They countered these concerns, however, by accepting new challenges, sitting in the front rows and allocating more time than sometimes needed to complete given assignments.

This study has a great deal in common with the work of feminist researchers and adult education advocates. The intimate glimpses into the behaviors and experiences of the re-entry women as they pursued their associate's degrees provide rich fodder for considering how all higher education institutions might better understand and support the re-entry women increasingly found in their hallowed halls. The work of Nancy LaPaglia (1994) most closely mirrors the population studied in this research, although her data were collected while the participants were students and this data results from discussions with graduates.

As noted in Chapter 2, LaPaglia identified four major themes in the written journals of the students in her study: Agency, Marginality, Joy of Learning and Juggling. To refresh, Agency referred to the re-entry women's intentions to thoughtfully control their own lives and destinies rather than reacting to life's challenges. Marginality referred to their sense of being on the outskirts of society in their gender, ethnicity, choice of educational institutions, or age of matriculation. Joy of Learning referred to the students' sense of developing self-esteem and value; and Juggling was just that--the balancing act required of re-entry students, especially women.

The perspectives of the community college re-entry women in this study which were discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, confirm the themes noted in LaPaglia's research. Their community colleges were the agent by which they discovered the value of exerting control over their lives and actions as opposed to being controlled. They may have bought into early perceptions of themselves as "losers or drifters" (LaPaglia, 1994, p. 67), but the success that they encountered as they pursued the associate's degree helped them to develop a new sense of themselves as productive, deliberate women.

The women interviewed in this study were less marginalized than those in LaPaglia's study (1994), as they expressed pride in their accomplishments, their maturity and the "step" they had taken to change their lives. They were clearly at a beginning point, but they were working for a college degree at an institution of higher education. The only hint at perceptions that the community college might be a "less than adequate" college was provided in the quandary of whether to check the "college graduate" box on a survey. This quandary was quickly resolved in the affirmative. As graduates, the women in this study extended the "step" metaphor used by LaPaglia's participants to a "travel" metaphor. These women spoke about the "paths," "journey," "distance," and "destination" to their goals. They "chugged on down the road," "went in new directions," or "actually are moving forward." These women didn't just step up--they climbed Mount Everest! This reflection upon their education and personal and professional "movement" from one place to another--reflections that were neither linear nor ascending--indicates a respect for the process they encountered. Perhaps it was only through the eyes of a graduate that this broader metaphor could be discovered.

The Joy of Learning theme of LaPaglia's study parallels the self awakening and intangible rewards articulated by this group of re-entry women students. They also shared the Juggling theme. However, the women in this study could articulate how that Joy of Learning transferred to new situations in other educational institutions or work settings. Each of the women reported being forever changed by their community college experience, in ways that diminished the struggles that accompanied their efforts. They also recognized that life *is* Juggling, as obligations and desires compete for time, money and energy. This insight

helped to reinforce the sense that accepting challenges and acting without fear (even if it's there) and acknowledging successes when no one else seems to be providing that feedback will afford ongoing opportunities for intellectual and emotional growth and development.

As the preceding pages have illustrated, this study supports a number of the observations and themes identified in the literature on re-entry women students. That said, this study also produced findings that went beyond those previously published. In large measure, these new findings may be related to the differences between this study and others found in the research, including (1) the focus on alumnae perspectives rather than those of women currently engaged in the educational setting; (2) the study of community college women from diverse cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds rather than largely white, middle class, college and university women; and (3) the use of qualitative methodologies to develop a context and understanding of the research findings that might not be evident in more statistically-driven research. The following section examines the conclusions which may be drawn from this research and the implications for higher education.

Conclusions and Implications

When all is said and done, what can be learned from these incredible, determined, re-entry women? Perhaps the most important lesson is that women who enter colleges and universities at a non-traditional age are not second class students, but a segment of students in American higher education that holds incredible potential for individual, familial, and societal change. Re-entry women students come from many walks of life and backgrounds, and a college degree may or may not have been part of their early life plans. They should not

be ignored on the basis of past educational records, race, socio-economic-status, age or lack of a defined goal; rather, they should be welcomed for the diversity, challenge, and unique voices that they add to the tenor of higher education today and the workplace tomorrow.

An equally important finding is the model that community colleges provide for service to and empowerment of re-entry women students. As portals for access to higher education, community colleges are clearly avenues to success for re-entry women students. The unique features of these colleges should be enhanced and communicated to potential students, employers, policy makers, and colleagues in other sectors of higher education.

Whether rural or urban, aged 20 or 70, students of vocational education or honors programs--the women in this study expressed common concerns and common pleasures. Their willingness to take risks, possibly engender disapproval, and sacrifice for long-term gain seemed to be much stronger indicators of success than the criteria typically used by higher education institutions (e.g., high school grades, standardized test scores). What made a difference--in each case--was their ability to connect with the community college through special faculty, intriguing academic opportunities, students in their discipline, college work-study, student organizations, or specially designed support programs.

The women in this study identified thwarted hopes and real hurts that mitigated against their success. They also identified unmitigated determination, courage, persistence and humor. Several directives for higher education are evident from their stories:

- The American educational system must give community colleges their full due as institutions of higher learning. They must not be discussed using diminutive labels ("junior" colleges) or pejorative tones if individuals needing the array of educational opportunities

available in comprehensive two-year colleges are expected to consider them viable educational options. Community colleges prepare individuals for further study at the baccalaureate and graduate levels. If baccalaureate and graduate institutions are to continue as beneficiaries of the good work of community college classrooms, they must view two-year colleges as partners rather than competitors or detention halls for the less-well-prepared-student. Dual admissions agreements, well articulated programs of study, and transfer student advisors help to keep communication lines open and the focus on the teaching and learning mission shared by *all colleges and universities,* and which may be complemented by unique programs of study, research, or applied learning embraced by various sectors. In this spirit of cooperation, faculty and professional organizations should aim for inclusion of all members of the order rather than segmentation into groups for individuals mired in certain disciplines at certain levels of education to talk exclusively among themselves. The credentials, research endeavors, and frustrations and goals of English faculty in the community college likely parallel those issues for the undergraduate professor at a variety of colleges or universities. Faculty at all levels must be encouraged to understand the many shared challenges of their profession in order that they may be resources for each other and for their students. In addition, financial acknowledgement of the contributions of two-year institutions must be adjusted if they are to continue to serve the students of the future. As more students realize the quality of the programs offered by local community colleges and the importance of an education in our increasingly technical and information-driven society, the numbers of students in community colleges will continue to rise. The importance of community college work must be given more than public acknowledgement; it must also

receive adequate financial resources to keep pace with these shifts in student demographics.

- Colleges and universities--including community colleges--must recognize that their responsibilities and services extend to *every student that they matriculate*--despite race or color, age or gender, physical abilities or disabilities. Too often, higher education has viewed women as seat holders when population variables fluctuated--when men were absent from classrooms--due to war, birth control, or the economy. While re-entry women do fill enrollment quotas, they also enroll with various needs and expectations that could be met by the higher education system if the college or university was aware of and valued these students. And they generate tuition and scholarship dollars.

Several indicators of the value of a particular group of students to an institution were mentioned by participants in this study. Just as the availability of notetakers signifies the value of students with learning disabilities in a college community, the availability of child care insinuates an understanding of the needs of re-entry women students. While competitive team sports and fast-food stations may serve recent college graduates, physical fitness centers and healthy foods in campus delicatessens and vending machines may better meet the interests and needs of re-entry students as they try to balance the multiple obligations of their lives. Financial awards must be available to qualified re-entry women students as well as valedictorians or star quarterbacks of the local community high school, and leadership programs must recognize the importance of organizing a community watch group or volunteering in a child's classroom as equal to assisting with a food drive or tutoring high risk students. Campus activities that include family events and entertainment that parents can share with their children speak volumes about the value an institution places upon students

who may not be primarily interested in finding a date for Saturday night.

Equal in importance to activities that convey the inclusion and acceptance of a particular student group, is the ongoing need to reduce and remove institutional barriers to re-entry students' success. Colleges and universities must find ways to meet changing child care needs--perhaps by offering evening hours for grade school students. They must develop counseling and advisement strategies that connect students with available funding resources, fully examine program options, and periodically revisit the students' goals and aspirations at various points in the educational process which are not limited to the beginning and the end of a program of study. Entrance requirements must take into account the rich experience that re-entry women bring to the classroom and the varying skill levels they introduce. For example, rigidly starting every student at English Composition 100 is a disservice to those who need the basic introductory level and those who are clearly advanced in their writing abilities. Assessment and advisement play a key role in determining the appropriate placement and course of study for these students. Rigid institutional orthodoxy based on past practice must be re-examined to ensure the development of flexible policies and procedures that safeguard the quality of the educational experience and product, while honoring the diverse voices of students enticed to higher education classrooms. Flexible and innovative student-centered programs and services must be considered to demonstrate the value of re-entry students to colleges and universities--with as much attention paid to programs like career planning and placement, leadership development and workplace networking as is currently given to intercollegiate athletics and Greek Affairs.

- Sustained efforts must be made to broaden the perspectives of college faculty, staff

and administrators to see re-entry women as serious students interested in developing their educational credentials to position themselves for future advancement in higher education or the workforce. They are the important income generators for many families, invested role models for their children, potential enrollments in baccalaureate and graduate programs, and people of value. They must be recognized and treated with the respect that they deserve. Community colleges seem to have welcomed this student sector in many ways, reducing institutional and situational barriers that exist; however, this effort must be on-going and persistent. Orientation programs provide choice opportunities to educate new faculty and staff about the various student groups they serve, and provide concrete examples of ways to facilitate the success of re-entry women students. Periodic workshops or "brown bag lunches" provide additional opportunities for colleagues to discuss student success and the important roles of feedback, multiple teaching/learning strategies, and connections with the college community. Profiles in the community college student or staff newspapers might be designed to share the re-entry women's stories with the college as a whole, increasing awareness and acceptance. Student panels or focus groups addressing different aspects of the student experience are wonderful opportunities for re-entry women to share the positive and negative facets of their experience with members of the college community.

- Community colleges must recognize that re-entry women students are not necessarily knowledgeable about the protocol, systems, policies and opportunities of their higher education institutions because they are of a mature age. It is important that college administrators, faculty and staff not assume that these students know what they want or how to get it. Doors to assistance must be opened early, kept ajar, and frequently reinforced with

this student group. Communications from marketing pieces through graduation procedures must convey an understanding of the unique challenges and fears of re-entry women students and provide strong messages of support and encouragement. Counselors, faculty advisors, and testing center staff must be trained to ask the questions that will detect the difference between real confidence and false bravado, or between a need for assistance and a fear of the implications of needing it. They must learn to be concrete and direct, and they must encourage re-entry women students to articulate the next steps they will take, the factors that may influence their success, and the ways that they will enhance positive factors and decrease negative influences. Too often, the women in this study expressed frustration with the fact that their naivete was greater than the college personnel assumed, and--given the tacit assumption that they were more informed--they found it embarrassing or difficult to express their ignorance. Re-entry students must be continually told and reminded that no question is stupid and that asking for help is a sign of strength rather than weakness.

- Colleges must not underestimate the value of the informal network of support and information that underlies each institution, and should look for ways to use the network for the students' advantage. Frequent opportunities for new students to speak with students who have "been there" or faculty who understand their unique hopes and fears will facilitate the right questions being asked and helpful answers being given. Recruitment offices should consider having current students available to give tours or facilitate discussions during college visits or orientation programs. Care should be taken to design study and lounge space that serves the commuting students needing a place to congregate or work between classes. Students should be encouraged to consider work-study employment, peer tutoring positions,

or short-term employment during advisement and registration periods in order that they can share what they have learned with others utilizing these services. Re-entry women students must be encouraged and encourage others to participate fully in college life, voicing the need for programs that are geared toward their interests and schedules.

- How faculty react to re-entry women in college classrooms is essential. Whether they are newly hired or seasoned educators, faculty must be helped to recognize the importance of clear and consistent expectations and explanations, meaningful and challenging classroom and homework exercises, authentic feedback based upon clearly communicated criteria, and respect for the intellect and experience of the diverse persons in their classes. These factors are essential if higher education is to be an agent to assist re-entry women and all students who are attempting to distinguish their voices in the clamor of modern society.

Faculty evaluations and advancement could be tied, at least in part, to the effort they make to positively influence student success. The nine exemplary teaching principles identified by Jerold Apps in 1981 provide a simple yet powerful guide for faculty to consider in this regard. They are worth repeating from Chapter 2, and--in most cases--elaborating upon:

1. *Learn to know your students.* Re-entry women crave validation and acceptance. They sit in the front row so they can get to know their teachers; common courtesy would dictate a need to return the compliment. Faculty should be encouraged to use every class section as an opportunity to form a new network for themselves and their students. Minimally, after spending three to four hours or more together each week for ten to fourteen weeks, every member of the class should know the names of everyone else in the room.

2. *Use the students' experiences as class content.* Re-entry women students are often, for the very first time as adults, focused on their own growth and development. In that regard, their interests may appear rather narcissistic during this crucial period of intellectual and emotional development. Using their experiences to bring a point home makes good sense.

3. *When possible, tie theory to practice.* Just as wanting to be a physician doesn't necessarily translate into knowing the requirements for the job, learning a theory does not necessarily guarantee its application. The re-entry women students in this study expressed a preference for instruction that ensured understanding by answering with questions of *why* and *how* as well as the *what*.

4. *Provide a climate conducive to learning.* Successful classrooms require respect for diverse views, encourage excitement about ideas, and applaud innovative thinking--even if it is flawed.

5. *Offer a variety of formats.* This principle, like the next, recognizes that learning styles vary and students learn through a variety of mediums. Lecture, discussion, laboratories, and field trips are to be encouraged.

6. *Offer a variety of techniques.* Multiple choice tests and essay questions, classroom participation and research papers, "chalk talk" lessons or student journals all provide opportunities for students to successfully demonstrate what they've learned.

7. *Provide students feedback on their progress.* Student assignments and tests should be graded and returned in a timely fashion. Students should be encouraged to meet with faculty to discuss their progress and methods to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their study routines. Grades, like verbal or written feedback, should appropriately reflect the

quality of the work of the students--neither inflating their skills nor downplaying their accomplishments.

8. *Help students acquire [educational] resources.* The more a faculty member knows about the programs and services available to students, the better he or she is able to assist students in utilizing these resources.

9. *Be available to students for out-of-class contacts.* Posted and maintained office hours are a minimal expectation. Information regarding E-mail or telephone access is desirable. But more than being merely available, exemplary practices encourage planned or unplanned out-of-class interactions. Advise a student group, plan an educational outing, have lunch with a student who is failing--or a student who is succeeding. Each of these out-of-class experiences has the potential to considerably broaden the value of teaching and learning interactions.

- Community college faculty should be encouraged to build in challenging opportunities for re-entry students to shine in the classroom and the broader educational community. Exercises like chalk talk, oral presentations, interviews, debates or problem-based dilemmas are difficult for re-entry women, but offer powerful opportunities to test and affirm their knowledge and abilities. Similarly, faculty and administrators need to recognize the value of honors and awards for individuals *of all ages* as they attempt new challenges and achieve success.

- Community college faculty should be encouraged to recognize the unique positions of re-entry women and to be tolerant as these students at times overcompensate for missed opportunities or perceived deficits caused by age or experience. Re-entry women students

must be supported and guided in their endeavors in order that they may feel comfortable with themselves and their decisions. They're doing what they need to do, and as they mature as students, they will need to do it less. Faculty should be sure to close feedback loops with these students, set clear expectations, and reinforce appropriate college student behaviors.

- Community colleges must continue to build opportunities for re-entry women to work with diverse groups of people in both classroom and non-classroom arenas. Efforts must be made to help these students see themselves as colleagues and mentors as well as nurturing women. Just as care is taken to explain the importance of technology in various endeavors, that same care should be used to explain the importance of group activities and problem-based team assignments as students prepare to work in an increasingly diverse workforce with rapidly changing organizational structures and methods.
- Community colleges and the students they serve must open the discussion for mutual gain. The re-entry women in this study identified many big issues and a plethora of smaller items that facilitate their success and were too numerous to mention in this report. Proactive approaches to soliciting the information that will help to develop an understanding of the experiences of re-entry women and the factors that feed their success must be identified and embraced.

## Recommendations for Further Study

While this study added several insights regarding community college re-entry women, there are many opportunities for further research regarding this dynamic student group and unique sector of American higher education. First and foremost, women students and community college settings must continue to be the focus of extended research. As

noted in the introduction to this study, female students and community colleges are relatively new phenomena in the higher education arena. Their roles, importance, numbers and goals have changed over time in response to social and cultural needs and expectations. It is important that this unique student group and these unique educational settings be constantly evaluated to ensure and define their place in the world of academia.

In that regard, it is evident that the supportive community college environments described by the women in this study warrant further examination. What factors promote the success of re-entry women students who are less determined than the women who participated in this study? How do they define support? Are there other modes of connecting to the college community that were not identified in this study but equally potent as membership in PTK, a college-work study job, or special support programs? Further examination of the dynamics between faculty and students--both in and out of the classroom--is recommended to further capitalize on this essential component for success. Teaching styles and learning patterns for re-entry women require additional investigation, particularly those utilizing qualitative methodologies to unearth the structure and substance that enlivens these processes.

The re-entry women students' perceptions of their relationships with people who shared their educational environments were fascinating. Insights into the re-entry women student experience might also be gained by soliciting the opinions and observations of traditionally-aged students, re-entry male students, faculty or staff.

Although several participants in this study articulated their perspectives on their community college experiences by forming comparisons with later experiences in a

baccalaureate program, attention to these issues was clearly beyond the scope of this study. However, the similarities and discrepancies in these experiences might provide rich information to facilitate seamless transitions between freshman/sophomore and junior/senior studies.

While it is important to study community college re-entry women who graduate, there is a good deal to be learned from those who begin and do not complete their studies. The experiences of those students who drop out each year would generate important data, and comparisons between their experiences and the experiences of students who persist to graduation would be invaluable. Likewise, additional investigation into the experiences of women of color and international students would yield valuable results.

The factors that promote exemplary teaching in community colleges warrant further examination, particularly in light of the low status of these educational institutions. The factors that attract faculty to community colleges, keep them there, and sustain them as they devote their energies to the teaching and learning process are worthy items for further examination.

This study sparked the researcher's interest in various issues, including: how belief in God inspires student success; the physical and biological factors influencing re-entry women students' success and the converse--college success and its influence upon re-entry women's health issues; the role of community colleges in service to the increasing population of senior citizens; and the factors that influence the role of re-entry women students in multi-generational classrooms. The list of potential research on re-entry women students in community colleges is extensive and, in light of what has been learned in this

study, worthy of future pursuit.

By sheer strength and determination, re-entry women students and community colleges have established their places in American higher education circles. Instead of viewing either phenomenon as a short term solution to cultural, economic, or philosophical shifts, the talents and successes of re-entry women students in two-year institutions must be more fully explored to ascertain the potential and benefits of this dynamic group. Furthermore, the unique features of the community college mission and practice must be investigated to ensure the successful and rippling effects of empowering individuals of all types through access to higher education.

# APPENDIX A

# PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION CORRESPONDENCE

Dr. J.W.
Mundelein Community College
USA Place
Suburban, IL 60000

Dear Dr. J.W.:

Thank you for agreeing to consider my proposal to use graduates of MCC in a research study regarding re-entry women students in the community college. As I mentioned, this study is being undertaken as partial requirements for a doctoral degree in higher education administration through the Graduate School at Loyola University Chicago.

The goal of this research is to better understand and describe the experience of re-entry women in the community college sector. More specifically, the study will involve interviews with eighteen female graduates of three community colleges in Illinois in an effort to develop an understanding of not only the challenges they faced as community college students, but also the personal and professional value that they derived from their educational experiences.

I have enclosed a copy of the materials which were utilized by the Institutional Review Board of Loyola University Chicago, as this synopsis of the research provides an overview of both the process and any associated risks to the student or cooperating institutions. If you desire additional information, I would be pleased to forward the complete research proposal to you.

Once you have agreed to work with me to identify potential participants, I ask that you identify an individual or group of individuals who could provide information to assist me in selecting a pool of women from whom the six students from MCC would ultimately be drawn. I would then require addresses and telephone numbers in order to contact potential participants and make arrangements for their involvement.

Additionally, I would like to utilize the community college as a site for the interviews, and would appreciate limited use of an office or classroom for this purpose.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration of my proposal. I will contact you in the near future to answer any questions and determine your ability to assist me in this research project.

Sincerely,

Jean Van Landuyt Kartje
Enclosure

Informed Consent

A Qualitative Study of the Community College Experience of Re-Entry Women: The Graduates' Perspective

I, _____, state that I am over 18 years of age and that I wish to participate in a research project conducted by Jean Van Landuyt Kartje, Ph.D. Candidate who has fully explained to me the procedures involved and the need for this research; has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time without prejudice; has offered to answer any given inquiries which I may make concerning the procedures to be followed; and has informed me that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

I, _____, understand that the interview session will be audio-taped and later transcribed by the researcher. I will be given a copy of the transcription in order to clarify or elaborate upon the information which is shared in the interview.
I freely and voluntarily consent to my participation in the research project.

_____

(Signature of Investigator) (Date)

_____

(Signature of Subject) (Date)

_____

(Signature of Witness to the oral explanation and to subject's signature) (Date)

# APPENDIX B

# INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

The following is a list of interview questions used to elicit information for this study. The three research questions provide the foundation for the questions which were addressed with each interview participant.

Questions Regarding the Decision to Return to College

1. What led to your returning to college when you did?

2. What was your major field of study at (institution name)? How did you select that area?

Questions Regarding the General Community College Experience

1. Tell me about (describe) your experience at (institution name). How did you spend a typical day?

2. When you think about that time, what are your most vivid memories?
   - Are there certain people you remember? (Faculty, staff, students?)
   - What places hold special meanings for you? What did you do in them?
   - What activities are memorable? (Classroom, co-curricular?)

3. What were the other students at the college like? What was the nature of your interactions with them? Did you mainly interact in class, or did you spend time with them outside of class? Work on group projects?

4. Did you bring any pictures or assignments that were important to you during your years at (name institution)? Let's talk about them.

Questions Regarding Challenges or Barriers and Support for Re-entering College

1. Tell me about any special challenges that you faced as a re-entry woman student.

2. Did you share your community college experience with family members and friends?
   - If yes: In what ways did you share the experience?
   - If no: What kept you from sharing your experience?
   - Did your relationships change in any way?

2. What was the hardest thing about being a re-entry woman student? What went smoothly/what as the easiest thing?

3. Did you have much support of your work at (institution name)? Where did the support come from? What form did it take?

4. Did you attend your graduation? Who helped you celebrate? How?

Value/Outcomes of Community College Experience

1. If I asked them, how do you think your family or friends would describe you during the time you were studying at (institution name)?

2. During college did your body go through any changes that you were aware of?

3. What does it mean to you to be a community college graduate?

4.A. If you could ensure that every student at (institution name) had one experience you had, which one would you select? Who was involved? When/where did it occur?

- What do you think made this experience so special for you?
- How did you feel as you participated in this experience?
- What did you do after this event?
- How do you think others could benefit from an experience like this one?
- Was this an isolated experience, or something that happened on other occasions with other people?

4.B. Conversely, if you could have eliminated one experience, what would you have eliminated?

- Tell me about that event.
- How did you feel as you participated in this experience?
- Was this an isolated experience, or something that happened on other occasions with other people?
- What could be done to guard against this event happening again?

If there is no experience identified for elimination:

- What key factors contributed to your sense that each experience was valuable during your time at (institution name)?

5. How would you describe your perceptions of yourself when you first enrolled at the college? Was there any change in that perception over time? If so, what changes do you associate with your community college experience?

6. What are you doing now? What, if any, is the relationship between your current activities and goals and your community college experience?

7. When you think about it, was the community college degree worth the effort? What would you tell others who are considering attending (institution name)?

Wrap up:

- Overall, if you were asked to describe your experience in three words or less, what would you say?
- Are there any questions I should have asked you that would let me know more about your experience at (name institution)?
- Are there any additional comments you would like to make?
- Are there any questions you may have about what happens next in this study?

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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